

## A NOTE ON THIS MONOGRAPH

This monograph is a shortened version of the 290 page catalog - on 11x17" pages - made after packing (6 month of work) and removing Kurzen's art from Zen Acre (which, as I write these words, is being demolished). This monograph contains most of the texts of the catalog but many fewer image. Kurzen's oeuvre is not the most vast ever produced but its density, the importance and interrelatedness of the work, is hard to grasp without experiencing something like its whole extent. Though this monograph contains

hundreds of images certain ideas may not be accompanied by a fully convincing practical demonstration in the images.

The catalog was made in 2 version: the first as a guide to the content of the 19 racks, 25 boxes and other crates in which the work was packed. But such as book is only useful as long as the work remains together. The second version included location information about each work but presented it chronologically. In the course of composing this second catalog I made discoveries about Kurzen's art. This monograph recounts these discoveries.

Paul Rhoads, June 2023

## CHRONOLOGICAL NOTE

We may divide Kurzen's work into certain periods and categories. The **juvenile period** ends in 1942, followed by the **war drawings** (we have barely a trace of Kurzen's copious war painting) 1943-1945. The **mature work** begins after the war; it begins with the **early work**, an exploration of abstraction typical of its time, marked by a crisis which diverts Kurzen from non-objectivism as an exclusive concern.

In 1951 Kurzen spent at least part of the year in Mexico. It was during or around this time that the **Column Figures** and **Mirror paintings** emerge. As 1960 approaches the **Metaphysics of Adolescence** drawings begin to coalesce out of the growing figuration which creeps into the 'Column Figure' work.

During all this time, however, Kurzen is doing **sculpture in assemblage** which is always related to his graphic work, notably the **Mythics** and ceramic acrobats which are related to various phases of the 'early work', and various sculptural or utilitarian objects related to the 'Column Figures'. **20th Century Aboriginalism**, with its relation to abstraction generally, accompanies the early work also but takes on a life of its own in a growing enthusiasm for 'assemblage'.

The chronology of the 'assemblage' work is difficult to establish without reference to Kurzen's letters and papers, and I have made no great effort to reconstruct it here, though from personal familiarity and certain indications I am able to put some things in rough order. I present the sculpture as much thematically as chronologically: These efforts are merely preliminary.

A particular epoche in Kurzen's oeuvre is the show **Cool at 98.6 farhenheit** of 1966. Photos exist of this show. Kurzen's **pop-satire**, both painting and assemblage, date from this time. Thus 'Monet Money', 'Mop Man and Plunger' and so on are certainly from 1964-66.

During the late 1950s and into the 1960s also, the

'Metaphysics of Adolescence' drawings give rise to more and more figurative painting, the '**Diana**' series in particular. After the 'satirical' period Kurzen seems to have concentrated on sculpture, and in 1976 there was the important 'Reconstructions' show, thanks to which he discovered holography. During this period Kurzen's drawing evolves into what I call the **suites**. The only clear date here is '1974', on a single drawing (page 240) early in this category of work. These 'suites' of drawings treat related themes, notably 'Artist and Model', 'Pygmalion', 'The Heroic Sculptor' and finally a burlesque yet touching treatment of old age. The suites are probably from 1974-1976.

**Holograms in assemblage** occupied Kurzen from 1976 until the early 1990s, when he returned to painting. This **late** work was initially of a fairly strict 'Column Figure' type, which evolved into his **final** work which, though related to the 'Column Figure' painting, does not feature 'Column Figures' as such, and must be understood anew.

However, during all this time, through the 1970s and into the 2000s, Kurzen is also doing a variety of things, notably the 2 bronzes: 'In the Hand of the Muse' and 'Europa', the large portrait of Paul Rhoads, and other portraits, commercial drawings, and etc. and working on the 'Space-a-Maze', a cardboard toy like the 'Mythics'.

Finally it is clear - I experienced this personally - that Kurzen never completely abandoned or 'evolved beyond' any of his many modes, which were constantly cross-fertilizing his work and being developed in one direction or another in simultaneous projects. Exemplary are the 'Valentines'. To understand who Kurzen was as an artist, a feeling for the multifarious yet interrelated aspect of his oeuvre must be developed.

Paul Rhoads, February-April, 2023



## ABOUT KURZEN'S ART

### PRELIMINARY REMARK

I met Aaron Kurzen in 1970 as a 14 year-old, and instantly became his devoted student. In 1976, we became closely associated when, with Irving Podnos, I helped him with the 'Reconstructions' show. Thereafter I became a sort of apprentice, assistant, disciple, living with him and Saja for most of the years prior to my leaving the USA to live in France in 1990. Thereafter I never failed to visit Aaron on my yearly return to the states, and made special trips to the USA for 'From Villa Mnemosyne to Hotel Alpha', a project which took many years and underwent much metamorphosis. During that work, and despite already being the person certainly most familiar with Kurzen's work, I discovered much of which I had previously been ignorant. Now, in 2022 and 2023, through the experience of packing his work for removal from Zen Acre and the creation of this new catalog, I am surprised at how much more I have learned! This experience, however, though exciting, has been frustratingly difficult and remains incomplete because I was not allowed sufficient time with the work and documents, or sufficient tranquility during that time.

For the record, let it be known that the executrix of Kurzen's will, after having indicated I would be the inheritor of Kurzen's art, and after months of unpaid work done in close cooperation with her (from October 22 until May 23) sought to expel me from Zen Acre prior to the building of racks 18 and 19, or any of the cataloging of the boxes of Rack 10. This effort included menace of legal action (I was indeed served papers by a US marshal) and accusation of theft. During this time, in papers discarded by the executrix, I found not only letters from Massard to Saja recounting his adventures in Hollywood and relations with such stars as Oscar Levant but EE bonds to the value of \$117,007.00. Under this pressure I remained at Zen Acre, finishing my work to the minimum degree absolutely necessary - with the crucial assistance of David Lackey - and evacuated in early April. As much as this catalog may reveal about Kurzen's work, I consider it only a preliminary draft of what must be done for a proper and full understanding.

### 1 - A Synthetic Approach

Kurzen always conceived at once in terms of drawing and painting, sculpture and utilitarian objects, words and meanings, but also through the lens of time and his own formative and auto-biographical experience at the heart of 'modernism' or, as he said: 'the Avant-Guard', which developed so rapidly and dramatically during his maturity. In the painting '**Portrait of the Young Man as an Artist**' (p 93) a book with a Picasso reproduction lies open on the floor, while in the background the sculpture '**Nu Facile**' (p50) is presented. The Picasso reproduction, not only in itself, but pointedly by the beak-like character of the figure depicted, recalls '**At the Foot of the Master**' (p 49) while the title of the painting, whatever it may suggest about the subject, given the presence of '**Nu Facile**' and the trajectory of Kurzen's work as a young man, opens a world of ideas. This is but one example. The relationship of the 'Triangle Figures' to the 'Mythics', and their ceramic expression was a surprising discovery, which alerted me to the 'synthetic' aspect of all the rest of the work. Only from this perspective can the remarkable diversity of the œuvre be properly understood.

### 2 - The Erotic

I was aware of the importance Kurzen gave to his Valentines. I had not previously realized, however, the extent to which love, and even sex or, stated more largely, 'the erotic' permeates the work. To say nothing of eroticism in itself, the particular influence of the women in his life - Estelle, Saja, his hundreds of female students and finally Beatie - is enormous. Of course Duchamp was crucial to Kurzen, but his influence came to him through Saja and he associates her with it with surprising frequency. His late sculpture, '**In the Hand of the Muse**' (p 96) is, first of all, an evocation of his beloved 'mystery', source of spontaneity and serendipity, the reason he always qualified himself as a 'surrealist' and an aspect of his spiritual attitude. However, surveying the work as a whole, it becomes clear that this mysterious operation of 'the Muse' is effected to a great extent through erotic experience. I do not mean 'sexual' experience

necessarily, though the personal sexual impulse is an aspect of it. Studying the work, and based on my long intimacy with Kurzen, it is clear that his sexuality was to some extent baffled, and probably consciously sublimated in the art. A striking example is the drawing on page 37 (lower right). Kurzen's comportment with his students, most of whom were young women, was exemplary. The 'Metaphysics of Adolescence' drawings, 'Diana' paintings and 'drawing suites' are from his most intensive periods as as teacher. The over-all impression is breathtakingly erotic. A work like '**Sixty Nine Sanctified**' (p 43) is another indication of the electric sexuality underlying the art.

### 3 - Conceptual Labors

I was already somewhat familiar with the plethora of early drawings. It was only when compiling this catalog, however, that I realized how they are almost always directly associated with particular paintings. Not all evidence of that is shown here, though much is, for example the 'hat' series (p 7) and the '**Artist Painting a Mountain**' series (p 10 - five pages of examples are given in the catalog). There are five known '**Artist Painting a Mountain**' paintings and for each there are extensive studies. At first glance these seem characterized by extremely free invention but close inspection reveals a meticulous and even systematic approach, to such an extent that the very order of their making reveals itself in the progressive alterations, additions and subtractions within a developing language of abstraction. In the case of these particular studies, though not in others, I made an effort to put them in order; more work is needed and my presentation must not be considered definitive. Such series open a world of impassioned 'research' characteristic of western art at the time. It is foundational to our present artistic situation but unknown and forgotten today. Prior to the 'Column Figures' Kurzen participated in this research at white heat. Though he evolved quickly through them, a painting like '**Three of a Kind**' (p 13), from 1947, deserves attention as an utterly American example of European modernism. Such work is typical of the time but exceptional of its type. Such was the reaction of a group of French critics at the time who declared it "Formidable!"

### 4 - Time and Eternity

The advantage of Kurzen's limited 'carrier' is how most of his work remains in a group. Not everything is present; there remain zones of obscurity. Kurzen had a paradoxical relationship to art making and his own posterity. He seized unhesitatingly upon fragile, even evanescent materials. In one version of his will he proposed destruction of his oeuvre, yet he was clear about the importance he gave to certain works, emphasizing what can seem like trivial distinctions - such as between 'found' and 'original' holograms, 'demonstrations' and 'finished' work.

An aspect of this, and one which may have importance for us, is how he saw himself in relation to his time, and all time - his desire for "the new *and* the old", and the emphasis he gave to certain of his own works, namely those which mark an epoch in his own trajectory, a trajectory which he understood as, and desired to be - as was typical of his generation - an expression of his time. Few artists display such a diverse evolution coupled with such extensive exploration, discovery or invention, and even mastery, of so many manners and media which in turn have so many interrelations. The 'Valentine' as serious work of art and 'holograms in assemblage' are his most original forms. But though they are yet unknown, the 'Mythics' as sculptural drawings which become toys, or the Space-a-Maze - a toy which becomes a vehicle for spontaneous sculpture making through play - are unusual extensions of Kurzen's fecund creativity.

Kurzen had his nose in the wind; his art is as often biographical as responsive to events or attitudes in the world. The satire of pop-art is the most obvious example but '**Nameless Man in His Nameless World**' (p 9 & 15), a theme he treated several times in the late '40s, is certainly a response to the 'existential' crisis of the time, in the language in which it was then expressed.

Kurzen dearly loved society and socializing, yet he was not a worldly person. He did not crave success, did not marshal his energy and intelligence to that end, yet regretted its absence. He was certainly 'a dreamer' and only as such do the powerful paradoxes which characterize his attitude make sense. His gift to the world, to say nothing of its pedagogical aspect, is for us to appreciate and preserve.

Paul Rhoads, May, 2023

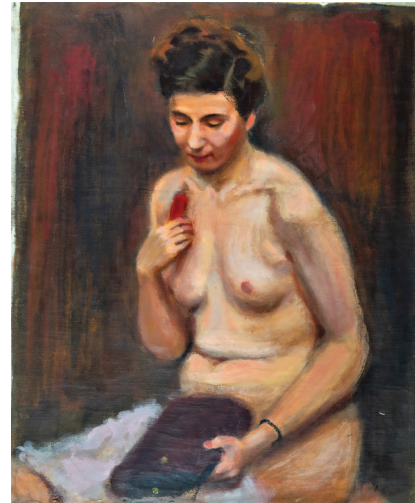


## The Thrill of Modernism

While teaching him traditional drawing, Cameron Booth introduced Kurzen to the modernist principles he had learned in Paris. These were: 1) a search for powerful expression through simplification, 2) a primary focus on 'decoration' (use of the page or canvas as such). The term 'Modernism' is deceptive; at that time it still often stood not for radical innovation but enthusiasm for artists like Rembrandt, particularly his drawings and certain of his paintings. The 'modernism' absorbed by Kurzen in the '30s and '40s was of this sort. The influences of Matisse and Picasso, but also Rembrandt and Ingres are apparent. Meanwhile the 1930s values of Social Realism also appear, notably in scenes of ordinary folk at play.



Awarded a scholarship at the Art Student's League, Kurzen went to New York prior to his war experience. There he studied with Vaclav Vytlacil, met Saja, and encountered Duchamp.





## Sports and WPA Show

In 1940-41 Kurzen developed a Social Realist and Modernist series of sports drawings, culminating in the Skaters show for the WPA in 1941. Only samples are shown here. The equestrian paintings were certainly influenced by Cameron Booth.



## War Drawings and Paintings

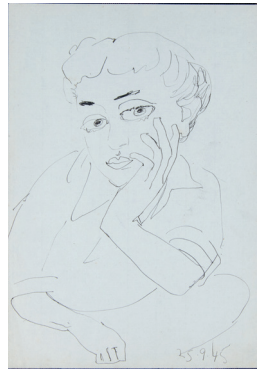
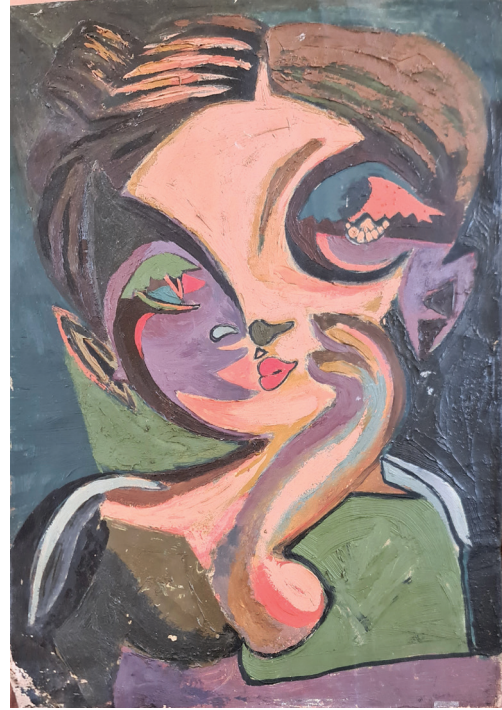
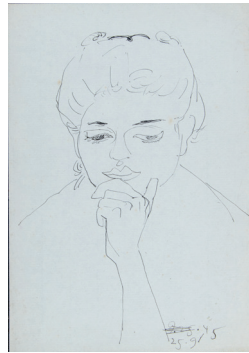




## The Adventure into Abstraction

After the war, in the winter of 1945, Kurzen returned to the ASL to study with Vytlačil, and also Booth, who by then had moved to New York. In paintings, prepared by an abundance of studies, Kurzen searched for an abstracted painting language beyond illusion. This kind of work, and the various abstracted idioms which characterize it, was what most other young painters were occupied with at the time. The portrait of Estelle (September 1945) is exemplary: it begins naturalistically and searches for an abstracted form. Kurzen's successive projects used a more and more abstracted starting point. He searched for a satisfactory

language, trying various kinds of shapes - spheres, triangles, etc. - with more and more radical results and hesitations between more and less abstracted language. A crisis is reached in '**Lowest Extremities**' (p 20) after which begins a slow retreat from the extremes of abstraction. After a pause to build **Zen Acre**, his return to painting is marked by return to illusion.





## The 'Woman in Hat' series

This work, inspired by Saja, occupied Kurzen for most of February 1946. Saja's secret (birth) name, Lenor Dunn, is used on a proto valentine 'hat' painting. Saja's names and initials (LD) appear throughout Kurzen's work. The imaginary hat paintings later became the basis of one of his student exercises. The rule of the exercise, 'portrait of a hat' was simply to fill the page with the hat. Class demo paintings, which were probably unnecessary, do not exist.





## From 'Woman in Hat' to 'Bride Throwing Bouquet'

Saja in her hat (Aaron and Saja would wed in 1950 in Mexico), female nudes joyfully dancing, and finally a bride: treating these related erotic themes Kurzen began his part in the abstraction movement, or 'expressionism' as it was usually then called, which preoccupied most young artists in New York of the time. By contrast with his pre-war efforts, where the abstraction is only exaggeration or simplification of 'nature', in the hat series he begins to explore a purely plastic language. Crescents, jagged and triangular forms, and netted patterns emerge as major elements.



Gay Gals  
R5, 42 x 48, March 1946,



Bride on Grey Field Throwing Bouquet  
20 x 25, 1946





## The Search for a Language

Though some paintings and drawings, particularly in the 1940s, are dated to the day, exact chronology is often difficult to establish. While some relationships are clear, certain approaches may have been explored simultaneously and Kurzen also reached back to language tools previously forged - as his final paintings show most dramatically.

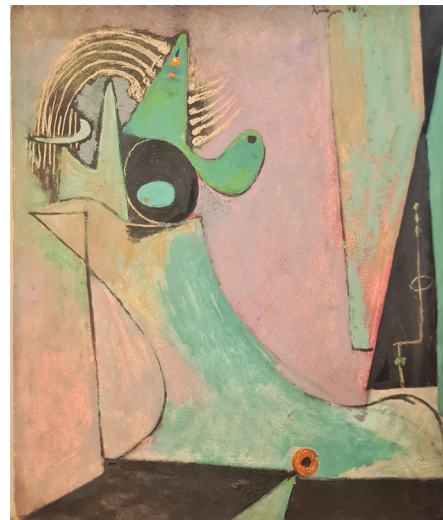
Many drawings are presented here but many more are not; certain stylistic phases and their links may be missing from the full account this catalog seeks to present.

The '**Nameless Man in His Nameless World**' (see also p 15) is also treated in a print in 1947. These two works, for example, may be simultaneous or sequential but the print is probably a later treatment of the theme; stylistic considerations suggest the painting could precede the '**Women Combing Hair**' series while the print seems related to other work from 1947 - which date it bares. Kurzen's papers may shed light on this matter whose interest involves insight into the the development of abstraction in mid-century America under the aegis of European teachers (Vytlačil) and European trained teachers (Booth).

Post-war American abstraction was influenced by surrealism, the major result of which was 'Abstract Expressionism'. European 'Post-impressionist' abstraction (cubism, Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase', Bonard, etc.) was more simply 'expressionist' or about exploring and discovering a graphic language related to observation/'nature', where Kurzen in particular seeks a symbolic language for the treatment of erotic, existential, joyful or dream-like themes. The Abstract Expressionist movement culminated in individual 'non-objective' vocabularies (styles) alleged to directly express inner states. Unlike the 19th century 'Symbolists' who sought to actually illustrate dream-states, Kurzen sought a language of abstracted forms which satisfied both post-impressionist and surrealist ideals.



Nameless Man in His Nameless World, 8 x 24, 1946



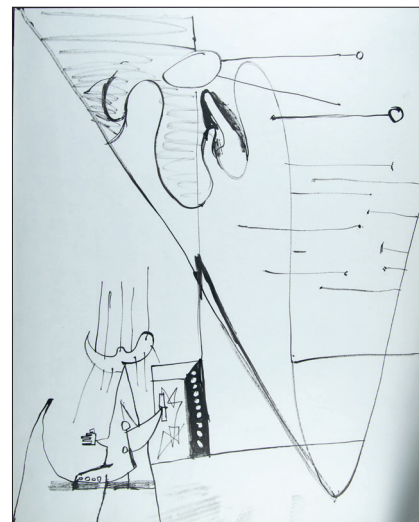
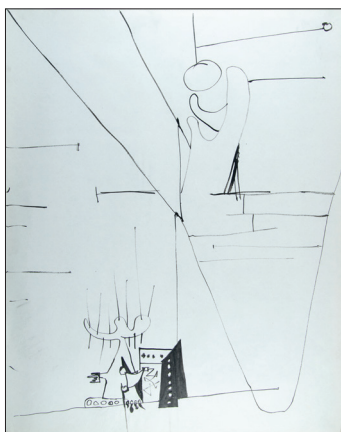
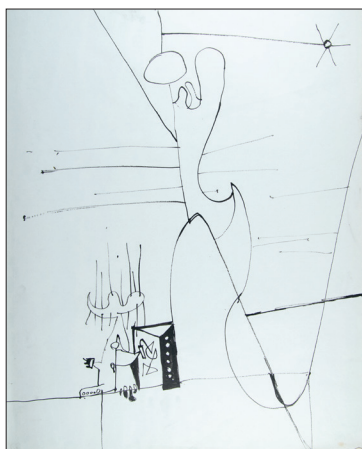
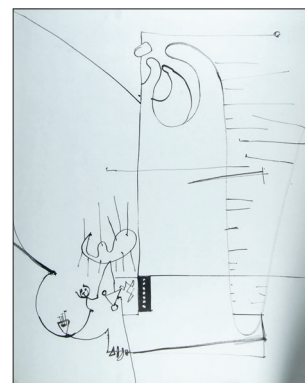
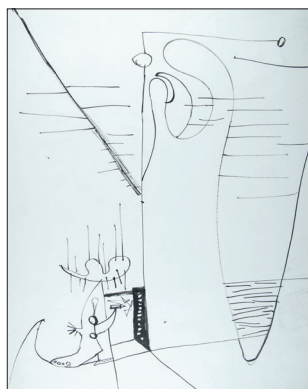
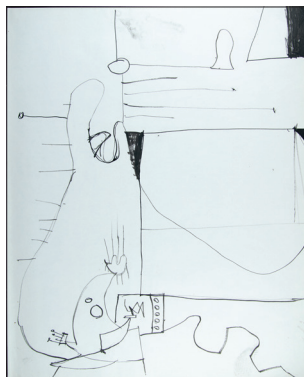
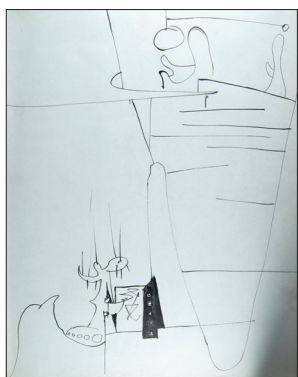
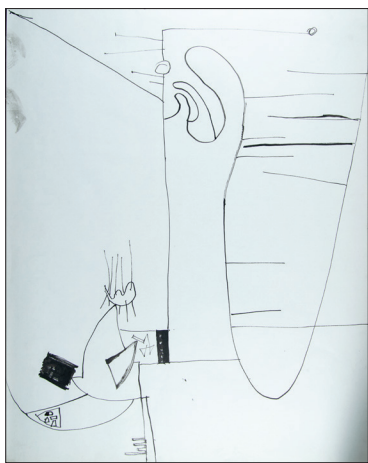
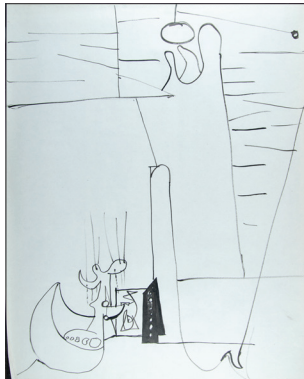
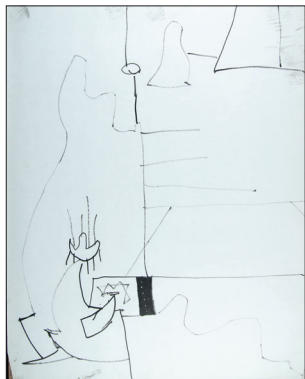
Woman Combing Her Hair, 20x24, 1946, oil on board



Woman Before Her Mirror, 18x24, 1946, oil on canvas



## May 1946: Artist Painting a Mountain



Artist Painting a Mountain, 20x24, 1946, oil on canvas

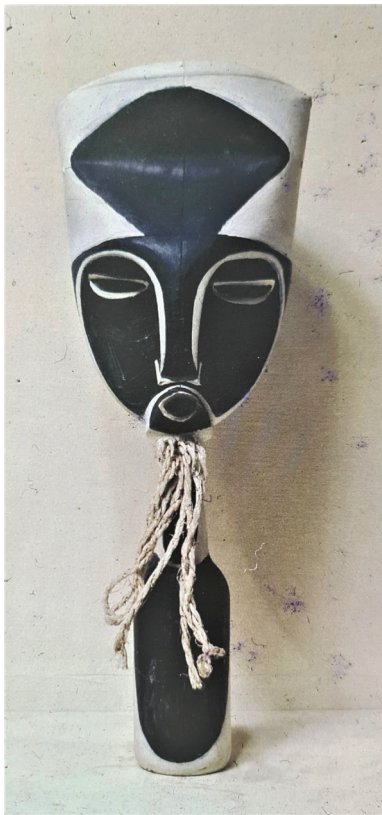
## Abstraction and Dada

It is often claimed that African Art is the source of Cubism. The actual source is Cezanne. Picasso's interest in African Art, which may or may not have been an inspiration for the faces of 'Les Femmes d'Alger', had little influence on most of his work. Kurzen's 'modern aboriginalism' reacts to the enthusiasm for 'Primitive Art', as it was admiringly called in an era when abstraction and Freudian emphasis on the unconscious - which underlay so much interest in surrealism - produced 'Art Brut'.

Kurzen's inspired use of materials puts his assemblage in another category than most such work which is often rooted in the surrealist playfulness which characterizes Duchamp's 'Readymades'. The 'Readymades', however, are not, as usually supposed, 'designated' by 'the artist' as 'Art' but were things discovered by Duchamp as having no

aesthetic effect on his own sensibilities. They were, in other words, as far from 'art' as possible. How they became central to late 20th century 'Art', and even 'aesthetic experience' itself, is properly understood in the spirit of Dada rather than as a social or artistic evolution, much less revolution.

The eclectic effect of most assemblage is in the spirit of Archibaldo's heads constructed of fruits and vegetables. Kurzen's assemblage, however, usually depends on a 'transformation' effected by seeing a thing anew. The transformation of a Cholox bottle into a head requires almost no modification. Kurzen's '**20th Century Aboriginalism**' in this way goes beyond its humorous aspect, to become a multi-layered reflection not merely on developments in modernist Art but on society generally.



Modern Aboriginal



20th Century Aboriginalism

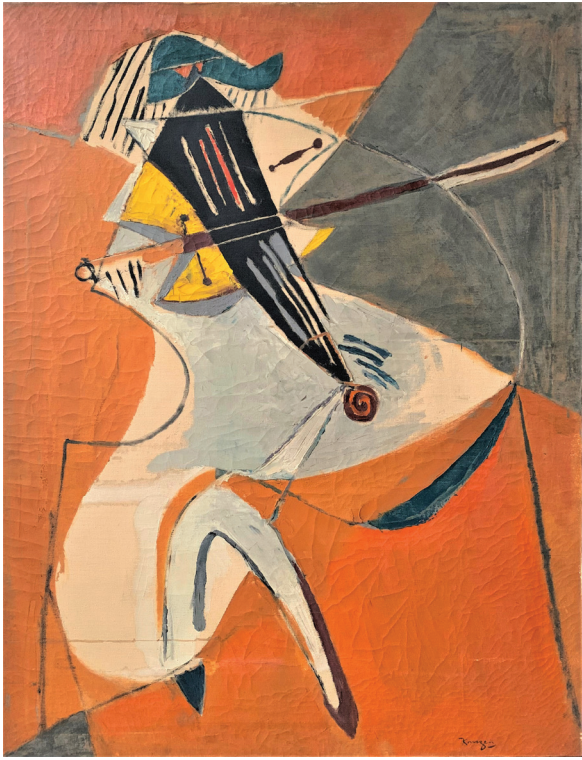


Portrait of a Portrait  
(after Rembrandt's self portrait at easel)  
24 x 30, oil on canvas

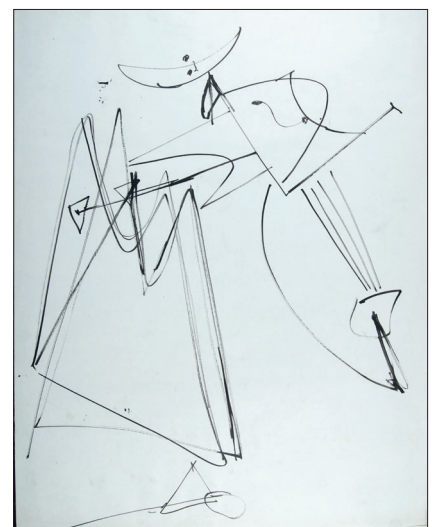
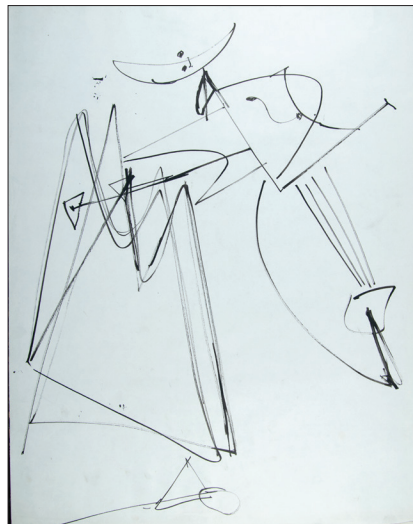
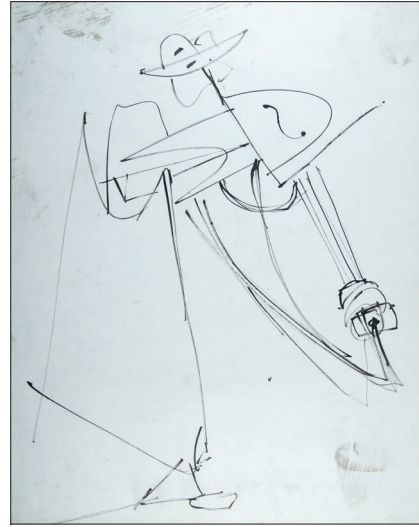


Potted Cactus, 16½x24½, oil on canvas





The Devil's Trill, 33½x44 ½, oil on canvas

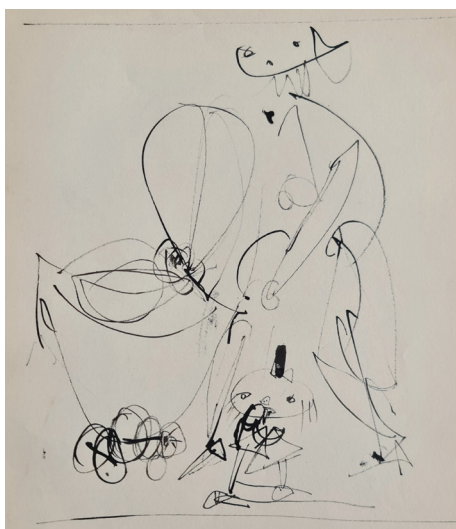






Three of a Kind

43 x 49, 1947, oil on canvas, restored 2022 by PWR





## Painting and Sculpture

For Kurzen the search for a language in painting was just as much a search in sculpture, e.g. the head and feet shapes in the above print and sculpture.

Kurzen said of himself that he was a sculptor foremost. He did not mean he was therefore not a painter. This sculptural aspect of painting is expressed in illusory space and volume - the '**Fool Thee I**' aspect of painting - but in Kurzen's case the search for a plastic language in the late 1940s may have been led by sculptural ideas, given how concrete his solutions were: triangles, ovals, crescents, diagonals. And not only types of shapes but types of textures - simple, gridded, swirled - and even contrasts of values and colors are, in Kurzen's painting, 'form' in a sculptural sense. Much of this experimental language derives from modernist work of the time, but Kurzen seems to have struggled to give it definite form. The suave and atmospheric qualities in the later painting should not be allowed to mask the strongly felt form.

It is intriguing to note how often apparently frenetic and casual mark-making is actually part of a deliberate process of form building. Note, in the 'Artist Painting a Mountain' studies for example, how many specific forms, which might seem random, are retained with precision through a long series of drawings.



The Kiss  
32 x 41, 1947w oil on canvas



'In the Lap of Love' or 'Amorous Couple'  
print, 1947



## Problems of Chronology

The orientation of certain pieces is not obvious; some paintings may be upside down or sideways. Correct orientation can sometimes be established by such things less easy to see in photographs like dripping paint or brush strokes. However, at the time of this catalog's preparation, the work itself, as well as any Kurzen papers which might have been helpful, had been made inaccessible by the estate. The present ordering is based only on the photographs, with whatever memory can add. A more adequate understanding must await better opportunity; users of this catalog should keep its non-authoritative character in mind. The work on this page in particular is impossible, on present evidence, to place with confidence.

The charcoal and tempera of a bird or bat seems more likely to be from 1949, but any relation it may have to other works is not clear.



The Sage, print 1947



Nameless Man In His Nameless World, print 1947





## July 1947 - the 'O' figures



The Barfly, 24x29½, July 7-8, 1947, oil on canvas



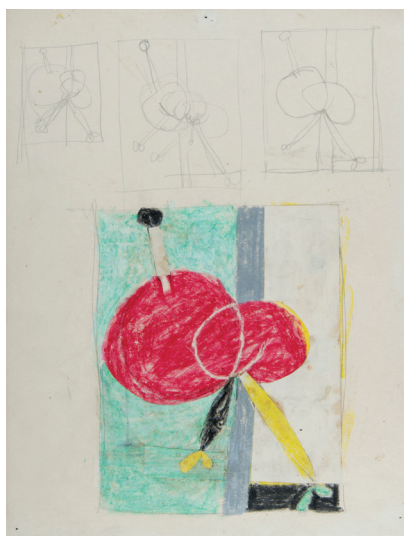
The Repast, 20x30, oil on board



Tempera and collage on paper



Ice Cream Cone, 23½x18½, oil on board



Return of the Prodigal, 42x30, collage on board



## Evolution of Abstract Language

Though only a few works are dated on these pages, stylistically and materially they seem to belong together. The date 1948 ('Abstract Head', next page) may only indicate when the superimposed glass layer was added. In any case, as familiarity with the later work makes clear, and while the years 1946-50 were notable for rapid and fecund stylistic evolution, Kurzen often reverted to older modes or alternated and combined different approaches, so that a clear idea of his stylistic evolution on stylistic evidence alone is difficult. There are, however, things which may be understood about his stylistic evolution and the relations between its phases.

The drawings across the lower section of these two pages show evolution from the proto-pop 'O' figures of 1947 to the 'X' figures which dominate 1948. Just as in later work, though traditional figuration dominates, abstract concerns were never absent; so here, in the late 1940s, while abstraction (which is never 'non-objective') dominates, traditional figuration is not absent.

While certain work - various 'abstract heads' or stylistic experiments based on the figure - veer towards non-objectivity, even the very abstracted 'X' figures are often engaged in some kind of dramatic action. If Kurzen's abstraction was feverishly experimental, it never took the apparently 'logical' (at the time) step into 'pure painting' (aka 'abstract expressionism').

NB. The terms 'O' 'X' and 'Triangle' figure are not necessarily Kurzen's but used here for convenience.



Comedian, 1948, print

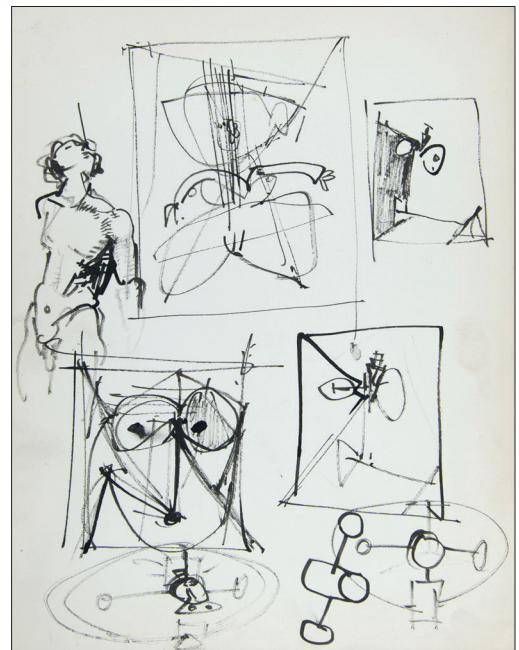
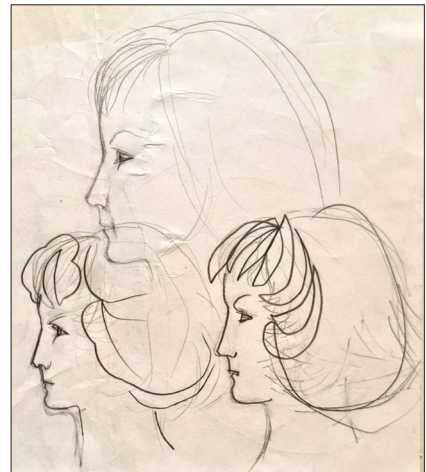
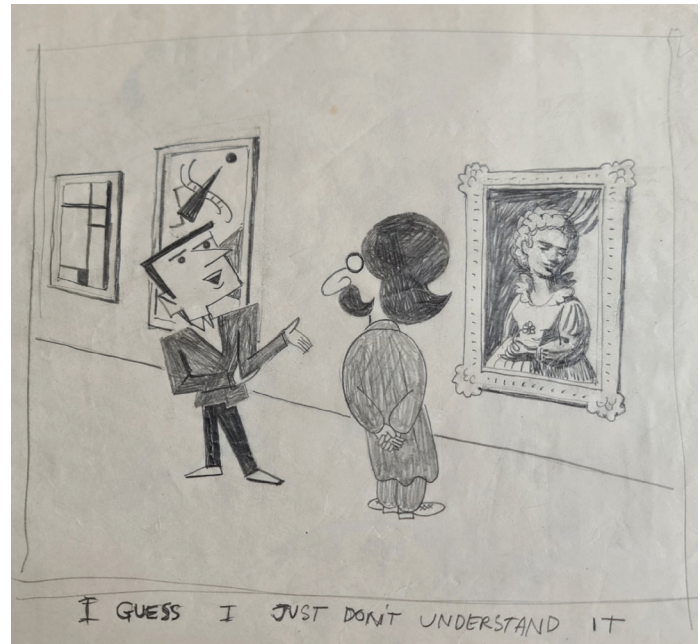


A Great Lady, 23x29, tempera & collage



## Problematic Modernism

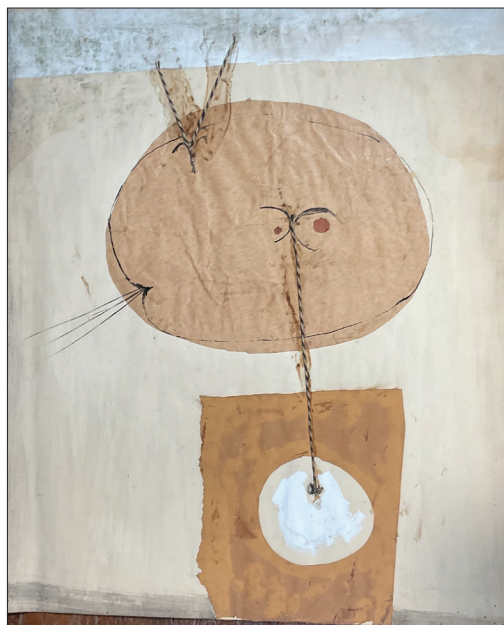
These draft cartoons are probably from this era: modern man incapable of understanding the past. Kurzen, an unconditional appreciator of the past, was surely lampooning historicism as applied to Art in his typically broad, gentle, yet pointed manner. His own engagement with modernism must be assessed in light of this cartoon. Is he suggesting that 'modern man' is mythical, for surely he did not mean that 'modern art' is somehow, or essentially, different from 'the past'. He certainly understood, however, that 'modernism' was generally regarded as both radically 'new' and that newness was seen as positive.



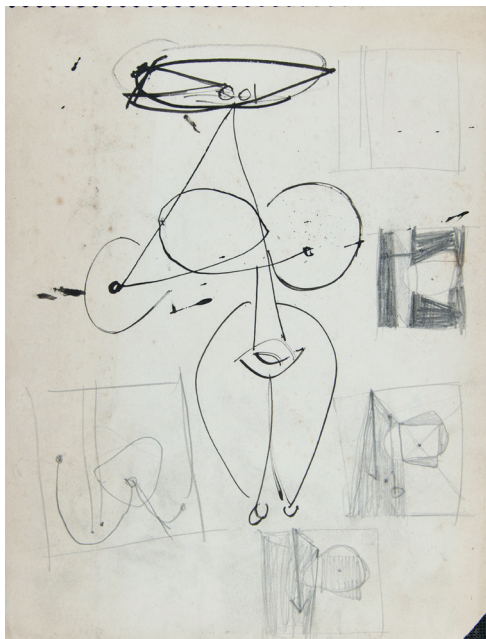




collage on paper 18 x 24



Abstract Head, 33 x 25, 1947, collage with ink





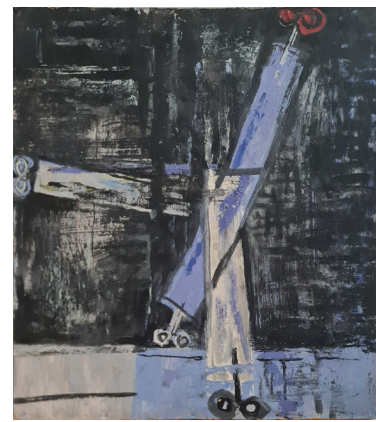
## 'Lowest Extremities' (the crisis of Abstract Expressionism)

'Lowest Extremities', part of a series dated to the day, appears to be Kurzen's crisis with abstraction. Its coloration and brushwork even seem to reflect anguish. While there is much strongly abstracted work in this period, it always has the quality of modernist formalism. This painting is the closest Kurzen ever came to 'Abstract Expressionism' with its surrealist, visceral or instinctive 'expression'. Only the abstracted feet remain to indicate the vertical element as a figure. Here we seem to have the proto 'Column figure'. In the 'Column figure' proper, which was to emerge three years later, rather than feet the face is figured. Here we may indeed say, as Kurzen apparently soon afterwards did say: **'The Feet Say it All'**.

Kurzen was unwilling to abandon figuration, not for the sake of figuration itself but for the sake of human drama, the human scene, or art as way of speaking about the human condition.



(title unknown) 12 x 16, March 17, 1948



The Sleepwalker, 18 x 20, March 19, 1948



Lamentation  
20 x 24½, January 16-18, 1948



Lowest Extremities, 20 x 26½, March 23, 1948



Passing Scene  
11 x 16, February 17, 1948



Red X Walking by A Green  
20 x 24, 14½ x 28, March 25, 1946



## ‘Altæration’

Though not currently possible to date most of the sculpture - the Kurzen papers will yield much such information - ‘**Altæration**’, which relates to 20th Century Aboriginalism, is certainly from this period. It begins an important duchampian vein in Kurzen’s work which, most profoundly, involves the discovery of unfamiliar or non-standard modes of Art usually related to word play.

‘**Altæration**’ is the first of such titles as ‘**Anatomical Comparative**’ (p 45), ‘**Translation**’, ‘**Fictionalization**’ (p 59) or ‘**Floorsky**’(p 101) which mix visual puns and word puns. Here, for example, the disks of cork are altered into heads. The chain which joins the work to an envelope - presumably holding a message - suggests the link between words and Art, or how naming things might be an act of force. That the chain, though attached to the art is merely lain on the message, suggests the linkage is fragile.



The Feet Say it All



Altæration

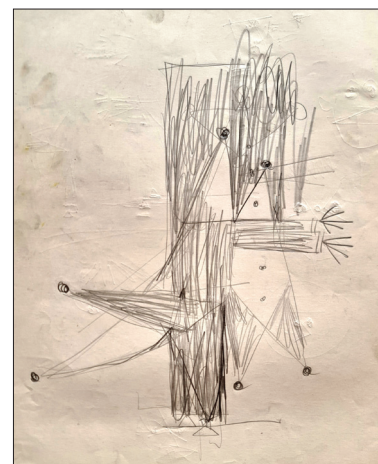
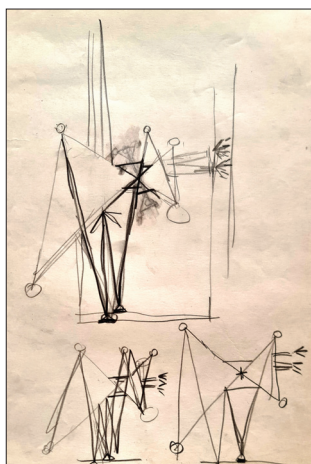


## June 1948, 'The Mesmerist'



The Mesmerist

48 x 28, oil on board, reworked in 1970s, June 20-26, 1948





## The Triangle Figures

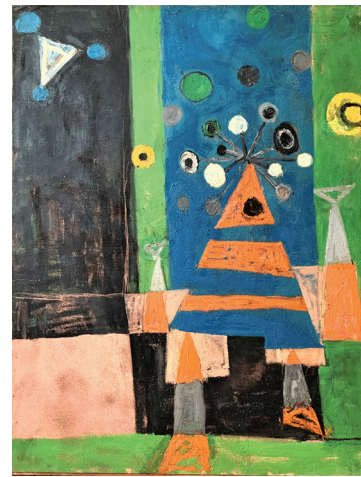
Recalling his pre-war sports and Social-realist subjects, Kurzen's themes often remain 'populist' ('Ice-cream Cone Vendor' p 16) and so also with the 'X Figures' the 'Triangle Figures' as they emerge with '**The Mesmerist**' and particularly the '**Juggler**' (see previous pages). After a series of weight lifters, who seem to be circus strong-men, a series of drawings - often dated 'Aug 48' - begins a phase which persists into Kurzen's Mexican sojourn (1951), where he studied ceramics and photography.

Initially the 'Triangle Figure' is mainly an acrobat, and far as it may range from direct relation to anatomy, it is never unrelated to the expressive character of the body in action. These figures are sometimes even identifiable by sex and age or represent animals.

Kurzen's treatment of his themes sculpturally as well as graphically becomes pronounced as the 'Triangle Figures' take sculptural form in cardboard and metal as '**Mythics**' but also in ceramic. Not merely decoration on utensils, Kurzen's figures become the form of the utensils themselves.

On this page are examples which date from 1948-50 which show not only the relation between figuration and abstraction and the 'pan-media' tendency of Kurzen's imagination but how these various modes persisted, hop-frogged, and nourished each other through time. In '**Hot Pursuit**' the 'X' figure returns after the emergence of the 'Triangle figure'. '**The Mesmerist**' and '**Circus Scene**' were reworked in the 1970s and 1990s respectively, which suggest the depth ideas arising in this period have in Kurzen's work overall.

Cheerful, humorous, vigorous, erotic, often humble and popular themes, contrast with the ultra seriousness of so much art of the period. With '**The Holy One**' (p 34) and mirror paintings of 1950, the proto-pop tendency reaches a climax. As a mode of social criticism it seems unique with Kurzen until Guston's defection from Abstract Expressionism two decades later but is distinguished from Guston's earthy and blatantly political approach by its more metaphysical orientation.



Juggler, 36½ x 48



Hot Pursuit, 22 x 19, December 24-25, 1948



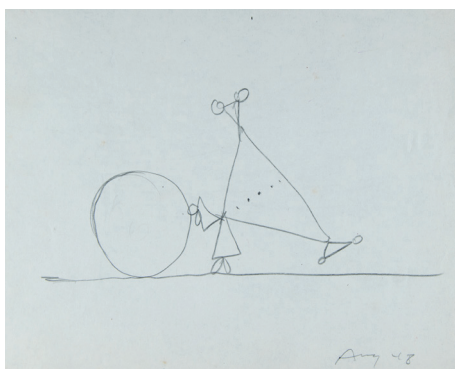
Circus Scene, 42 x 44, 10/15/1950, reworked 1990s,





pencil and crayon on paper, August 48

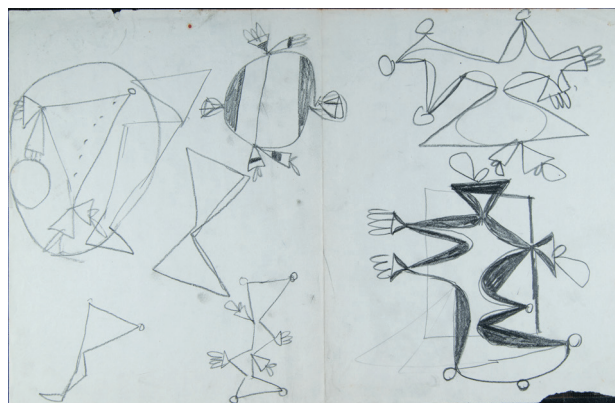
**'Clown with Red and Green'** is the only known painting directly associated with the great 'Aug 48' series of drawings (below), some of which experiment with shapes possibly related to the 'O' figures of 1947.



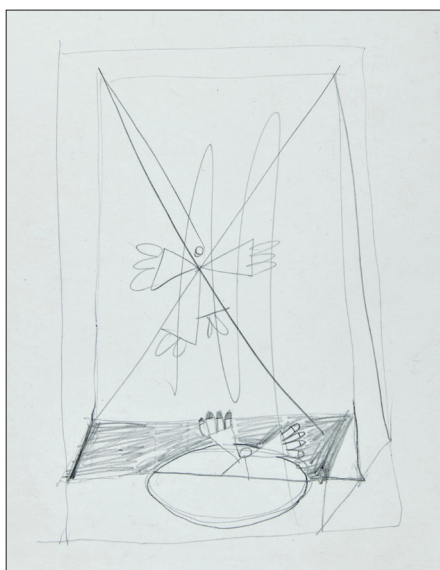
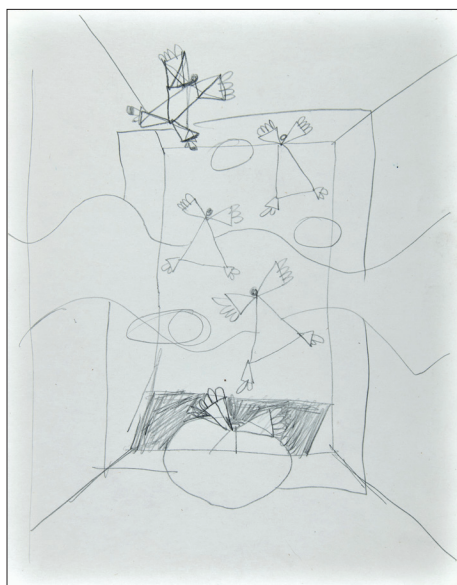
acrobat, Mythic, sheet metal



Clown with Red and Green, 22 x 24, 1948



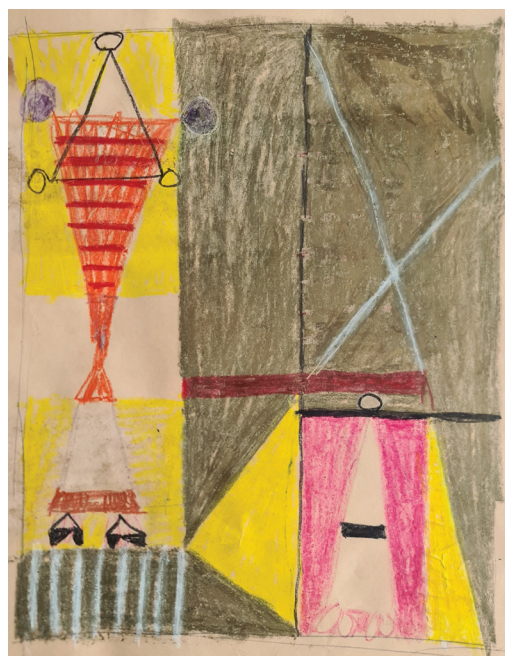




## Lines as Sculpture and Visa Versa

The two studies above, though without relation to any known painting, initiate an idea Kurzen used in paintings throughout later years ('**Innocence**': 1962, p 57, '**Translation**': 1959, p 59, '**SL & MD**': 1960, p 58, '**Nord D**': 1967, p 59, '**Between Pous-sin and Di Chirico at Dusk**': 2001?, p 99 and many others): a figure inscribed in a horizontal plain. This idea occurs in another form in early 'Column Paintings' (e.g. '**Hotel Alpha**': 1952?, p 43) where text is inscribed on plains which define an illusion of relief.

Drawing, which normally generates spatial illusion, inscribed upon an illusory plain is a paradox inherent to the language of painting related to anamorphosis but more natural in being understood intuitively, without mirrors or special angles of view. In the late paintings, notably '**Command Performance**' (2003, p 264) such 'inscribed' lines free themselves from any pre-established plain to define implied planes in transparent space.



pencil and crayon on paper



This large sheet (undated but found in a roll with the study for the '**Clown with Balloon**', opposite, and three other crayon and paper drawings: see previous pages) is clearly related to '**The Mesmerist**' series (p 23). It may, therefore, be from July, But perhaps these long triangle or 'KKK hood' figures were still a current idea. Be that as it may, the long equilateral triangle is a feature in later work. But rather than strictly vertical as here, it is always diagonally oriented ('**Total Eclipse**' & '**The Great Mime**' (p 29), '**Oh Hello**' p 33)





Circus Scene, 2ft x 6ft approx., acrylic on paper (no longer extant)

This picture ('Circus Scene') is a photo from 2009 - the painting was already in almost hopeless condition and the photo is partly a digital restoration. By 2022 only crumbling shards were left. This painting had a pendant, according to Kurzen of higher quality, which was stolen. This theft may have occurred in 1951 when Aaron and Saja were away in Mexico.



Necklace for Saja



Clown with Balloon, 15x23 ½



Boy with Dog, 21½ x 39



Kite Flyer, 21 x 48





circus horse and rider, Mythic: cardboard



Suzan Weil posing with a painting by Robert Rauchenberg showing Aaron and Suzan. 1949



Specialty Number on a Cloud, 48 x 34, 1949

### Outer Island

Tempera on Plaster, July 1949, missing (possibly on Outer Island)

Kurzen wrote: 'All the island's relevant inhabitants during July '49 are signified hereon.' These would have included the Weil family, their Chinese cook and Robert Rauchenberg.

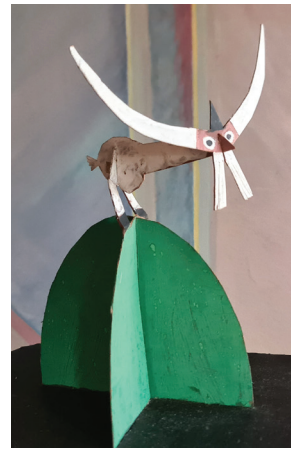
9 studies for this painting exist) showing evolution from a naturalistic study. Note lobster fishing (#6) and sun becoming a balloon (compare child and clown with balloon paintings).



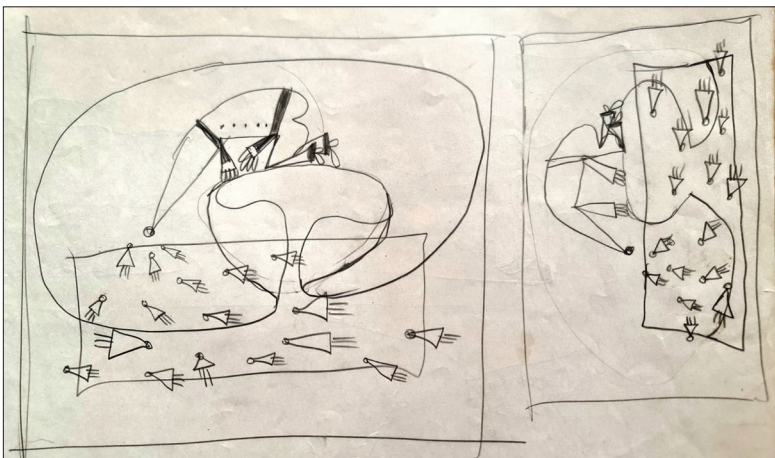
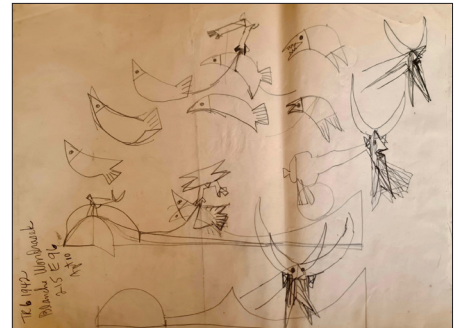


## Apotheosis of the 'Triangle Figure'

The expressiveness wrung from the simplest geometrical forms and an extremely limited pallet, is remarkable; the gesture of kneeling curiosity, the characteristically curious and coordinated movement of fish, the diffraction of sunlight in water - difficult to imagine any of these more fully or simultaneously expressed, such that a sense of cosmic consciousness pervades the painting. A sly Kurzen witticism: the genitals are represented though the figure is clothed.



Curiosity of Fishes, 39x34



## Mythics

Fish Rider (metal), and related drawings, recall the aquatic atmosphere of summer of 1949.



## Bible Stories and Mythology

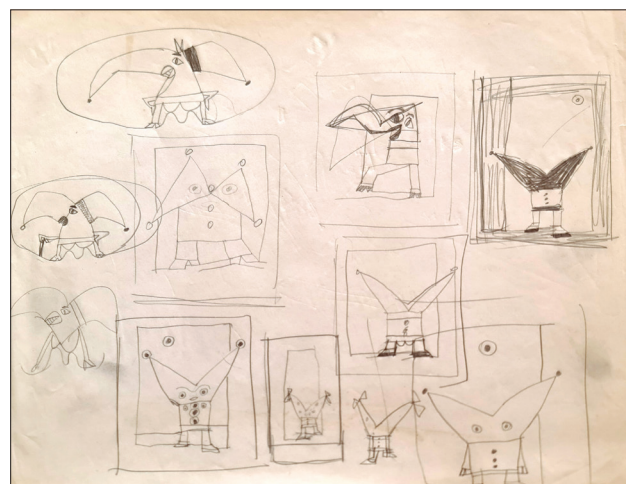
Not religious, though raised in an orthodox Jewish home, this sketch of the Nativity may be the first instance of biblical and then spiritual, and later 'metaphysical' subject matter which would begin to preoccupy Kurzen. Though as a teenager he had treated religious subjects - in copies of Rembrandt or original paintings and etchings (see pages 14-15: many other examples are not shown), he now approaches them as a mature artist with themes from the New and Old Testament. Saja, who shared Aaron's non-religious but spiritual orientation, was of Christian background.



The Great Mime, print 1949

Horns and ears reduced to triangles, then planes, then folded into sculptural form suggest both the creature of 'Total Eclipse' and 'The Great Mime' as well as the fabrication and character of the Mythics. This 'mythology is of Kurzen's own making, with the participation of his sister (not shown is their collaborative children's book with poems about various Mythics).

Note the small 'Total Eclipse' figure in the sketch for 'The Great Mime'.



Total Eclipse, (Eclipse of the Sun), 65x36





## Mythics: a Project for Children

Related to the 'Triangle Figures', the Mythics are often circus performers (magician or sword swallower), animal and hybrid fantasy figures often recalling old themes (bicycle riders, lollipops, etc.). As the letter (left), in addition to the children's book with Estelle, make clear, Kurzen thought of the Mythics as toys for children, possibly to be assembled and painted by them.

Forty years later the '**Space-a-Maze**' (p 30) was a similar project: a cardboard toy, for which Kurzen actually got a patent. Both projects involve children, cutting, and assembly of flat material, reminiscent of the clothes manufacture of his family. In Kurzen's library at Zen Acre were pattern books for cloth cutting certainly belonging to his father.

Kurzen was apparently in touch with Booth about the mythics (below). A price list suggests a sale ('**Juggler**' and '**Barfly**' are also painting titles). There are four extant samples of the 'Goat', some of metal, some of cardboard, so such a sale, if it even occurred, might not have been successful.



circus horse and rider, Mythic: metal



Chess set







### Revelation 12: 1-4

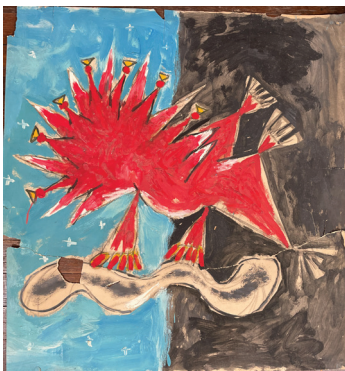
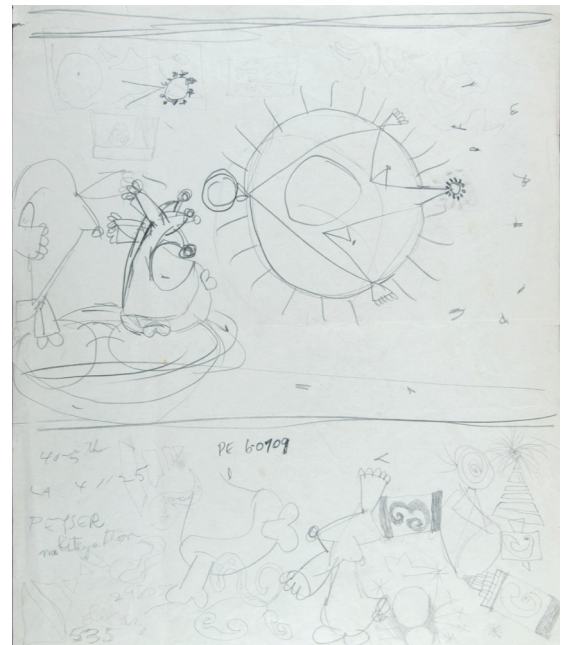
*And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: and she being with child cried travailling in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.*



### From Drawing to Ceramics

This photo shows ceramic acrobats on a cloud (needs restoration); surrounding drawings are preparations for this particular ceramic sculpture. The drawing may help establish the chronology of this piece relative to 'Woman Clothed with the Sun'.

The ceramic figure in a blue dress is constructed like animated cartoon figures, simplified versions of actual figures and real movement. They show the sort of thinking underlying the Mythics.





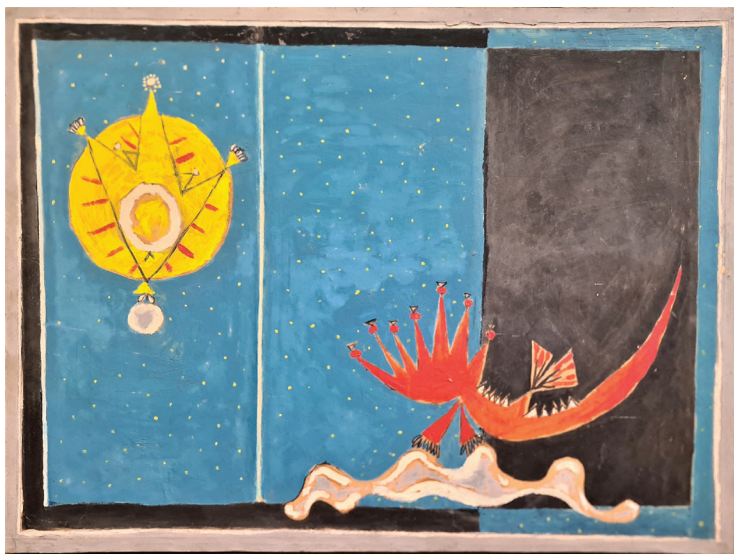
## A Woman Clothed with the Sun

Including the lost large painting, the series from Revelations is continued in a similar form in a Mirror Painting ('**The Temptation of St. Anybody**'). This marks a turn, with the '**Daniel**' print (not shown), to serious themes, here of a directly religious nature.

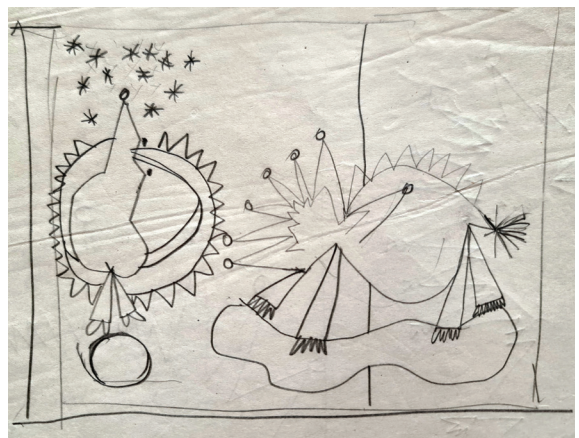
In the final work, a full scale painting, every aspect of the first four verses of Revelation 12 is indicated including the pregnancy (the circle inscribed inside the 'triangle figure' body), the femininity of the figure (breasts and genitals), and the pain of

childbirth (radiating red lines, red also being the color of the menacing beast with its seven horns). Note how the print version achieves the same indications in a more elegant manner. Through all these sketches, prints, and colored works on paper, we follow steps leading to this image of deceptive simplicity.

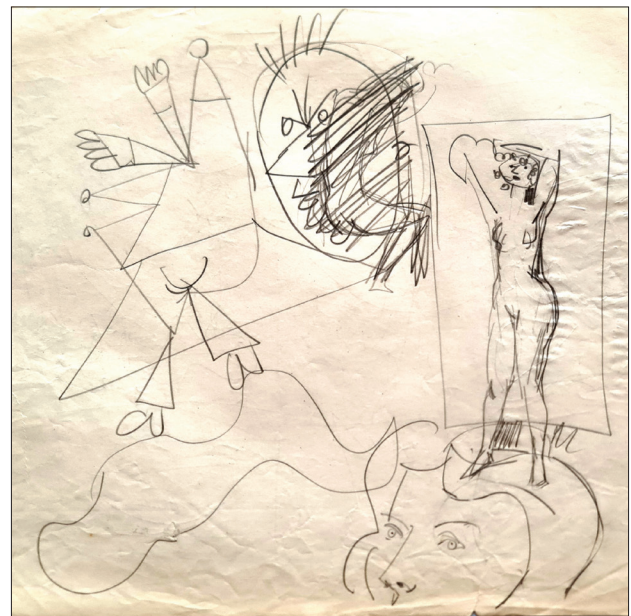
In the margin of one of the 'Revelation' drawings is a sketch of a vessel probably made in Mexico in 1951 which may have a relation to the beast (p 39). Be that as it may, all these works taken together, are another striking instance of Kurzen's multifarious thinking: representational, abstract, sculptural, utilitarian.



Revelation, Woman Clothed with the Sun  
(*'Revelations'* 12: 1-4) R6  
43 x 32, 1949



print: '*Revelation*', 18 x 12, 1949





## Mirror Paintings

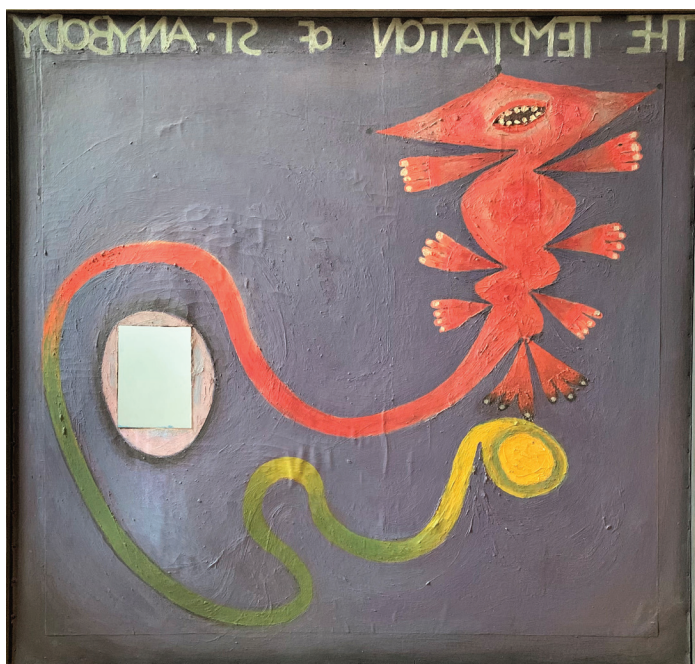
A mirror in a picture plain, as Kurzen explained to Robert Rauchenberg, is the ultimate in representation. No other flat surface treatment can give so thorough and convincing an illusion. But this aspect is only part of what drew Kurzen to the mirror idea at a time when ultimates and essences were so eagerly sought in art, for a mirror does something even more interesting than furnish the ultimate in illusion: it makes the viewer part of the painting, and it is this aspect which is emphasized in most of the mirror paintings.

Looking at 'The Temptation of St. Anybody' the viewer not only sees an image of himself as the 'anybody' in question, he may realize that

the reflection, not himself, *is* the *viewer* since the reversed writing is intended for *whomever* this viewer may be. This makes

the viewer part of the painting in another way, for the *viewer* is seeing the painting from 'the front', or normally. The viewer, therefore, is part of the painting as object, or the viewed. The temptation is not biblical but artistic, allowing oneself to be drawn hopelessly into theoretical convolutions of art theory about illusion and flatness which, in 1950, were raging as never before.

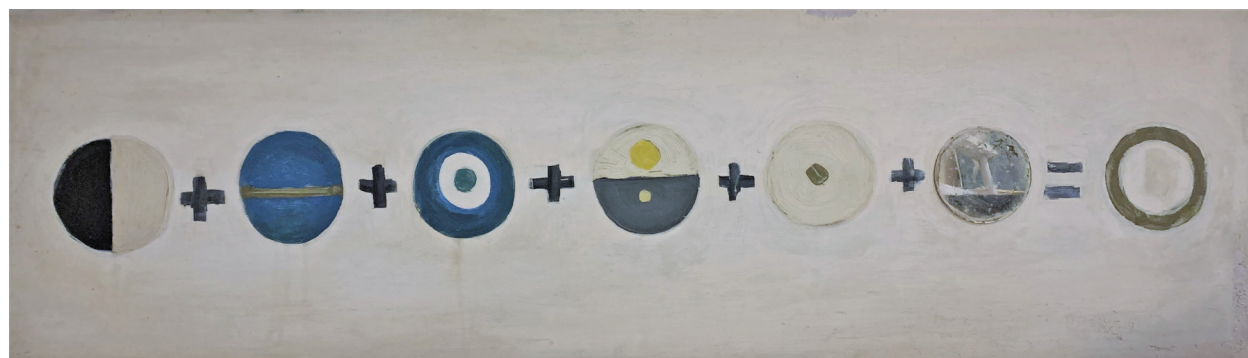
In the 'Cosmic Equation', the final term prior to the equal sign is a mirror (the viewer).



The Temptation of St. Anybody, 44 x 45, Oct. 14-15, 1950



O HELLO!  
18 x 24



Cosmic Equation  
1950, 48 x 14, oil, bronzing liquid and mirror on board



## Proto-Pop Art

'**The Holy One**' is the culmination of the 'triangle figure' and the largest of the mirror paintings. It is also the first of what would become a new and major theme in Kurzen's work: humorous but devastating social critique. The previous good-natured 'social realism' or such expressions of then fissionable 'existential angst' as '**Nameless Man in his Nameless World**' (p 9 & 15) do not begin to rise to the level of this ironically suave exposé.

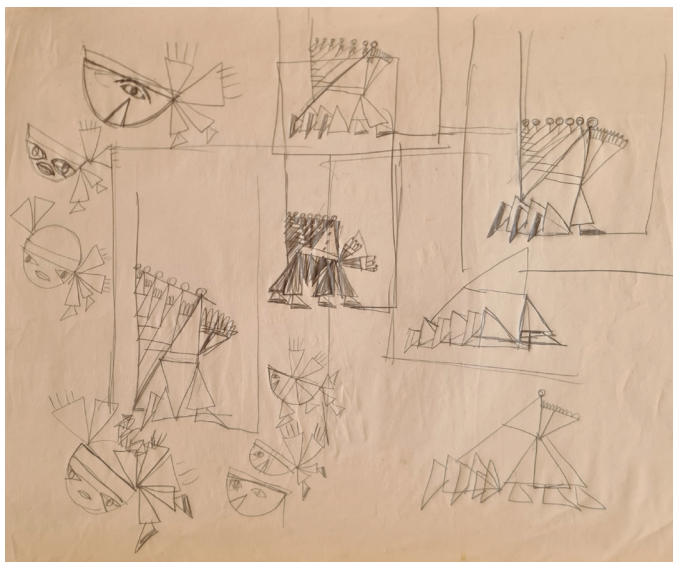
To the left: Hollywood chorus dancers; to the right: angels based on Kewpie dolls (this from

Kurzen himself). In the center the Holy One, who's mirror head allows us to identify him. Celebrating the rite of his own sanctity, he is the post-religious individual, the gallery goer, the art connoisseur, incarnation of the 'neo-fascist' self, the 'super-man' or 'prophet of the future', incarnation of vulgarized Nietzscheanism, the 'criminal-prophet-artist', the new Everyman, god of his own infinity beyond good and evil, creator of a new sacred reality.

This painting shows us an alarming and unflattering contemporary reality. '**The Door to the Soul Opens Inward**' is the antidote.



The Holy One, 75 x 48, 1950



The Door to the Soul  
Opens Inward  
18½ x 31½, 1950-63  
oil on board w/mirror  
partly restored, 2022





## Valentines

The yearly ritual of a Valentine card became serious Art for Kurzen. He owned a 'Valise' and other works by Duchamp; the Valentines are exemplary of Duchamp's influence. It consists in considering word play and humor, or 'banal' or surprising objects like modified post-cards, as 'Art'. In Kurzen's case the duchampian influence has original aspects, such as how the cutting, folding, covering, partially exposing and layering, or constructing an object such that the way it is discovered is part of the poetry. Also the direct and undisguised use of his own most intimate and profound feelings and impulses, as well as auto-derision on the one hand and lampoons of other artists on the other, distinguish Kurzen's work from the cooler and more impersonal Duchamp. Kurzen's non-rejection of 'the past' also gives a different coloration to this 'dada', 'duchampian' or 'surrealist' aspect. For example, though extremely duchampian in many ways, a work like '**False Dutch Master**' (p73) in it's boastful and showy auto-derision and boldly blatant scatology is unthinkable for Duchamp. Being a GI for three years left traces.

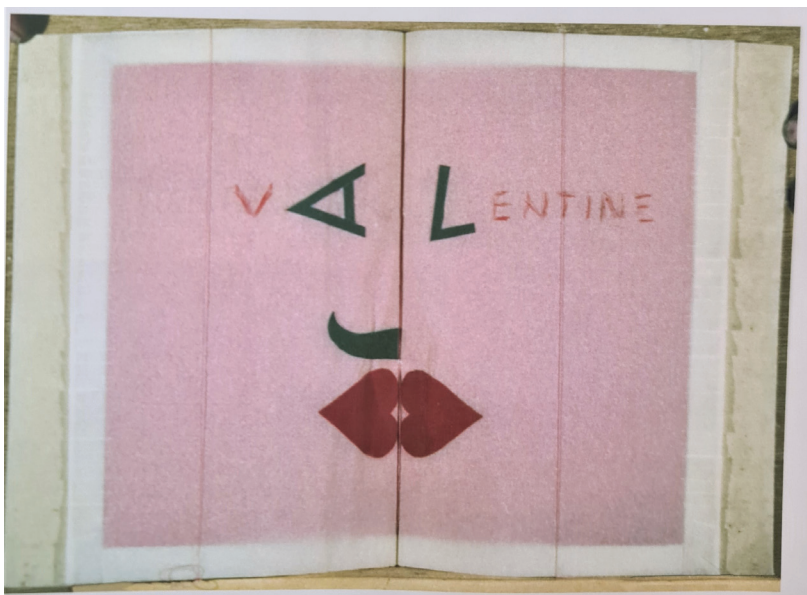
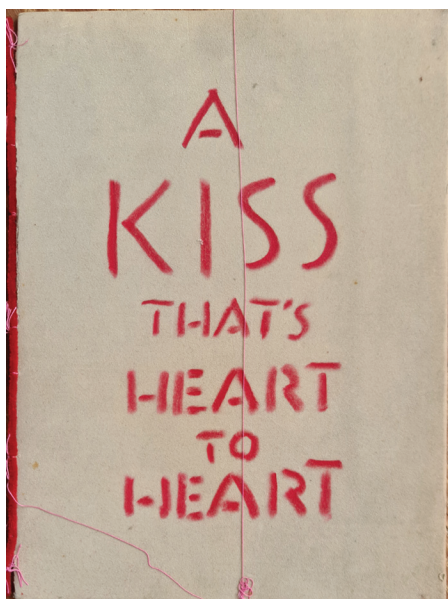
The 'Valentines' probably begin in the late 1940s and, addressed to Beatie Perry after Saja's death, continued until the latter's. Though he failed to preserve some of the 'Valentines' well, they were so important to Kurzen's sense of his œuvre that he made special mention of them in his will.

The Valentines are difficult to present in photographs. Many depend on an experience - such as opening an envelope and having a heart fall at your feet - or other kinds of moving parts. All, in one way are another, must be experienced. There is much reference to the sexual aspect of love or specific life events, yet they are never not 'Art' for anyone who has the privilege to experience them.

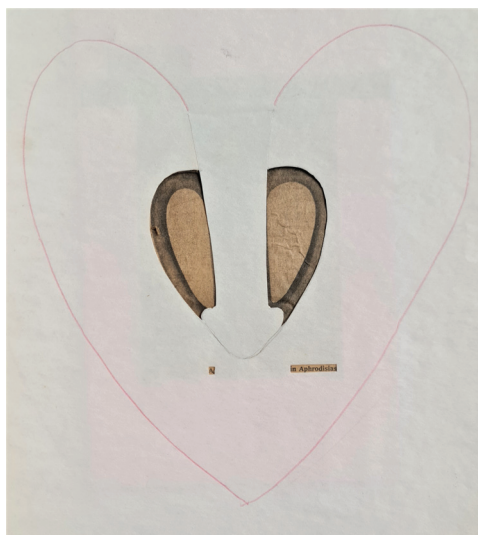
Saja birth name, Loraine Dunn, or her stage name 'Saja Laren', pet names (beginning with 'L') or her various initials (L D S) and his own (A K) are frequent elements of the Valentines.







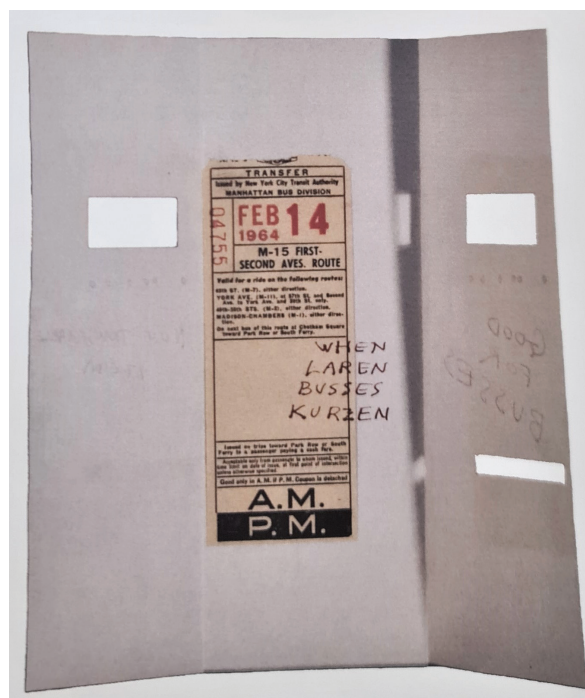
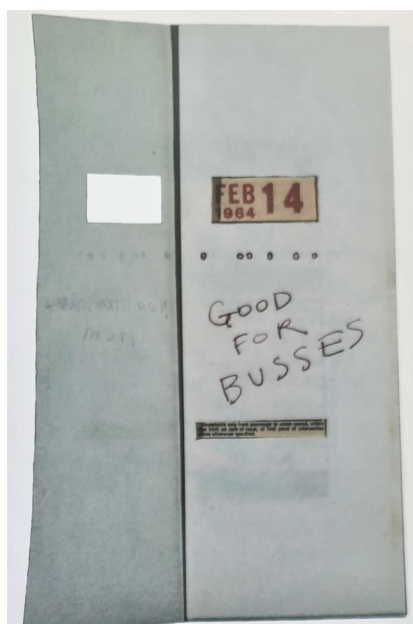
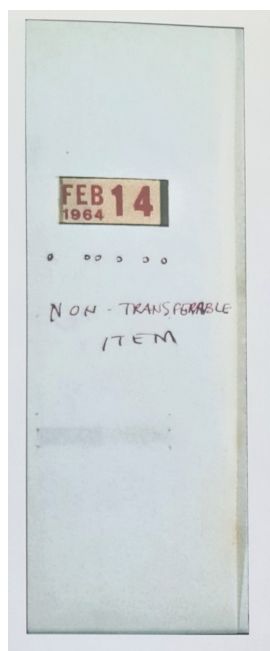
Valentine, R9  
23 x 23, 1987 - 'LD' = Loraine Dunn



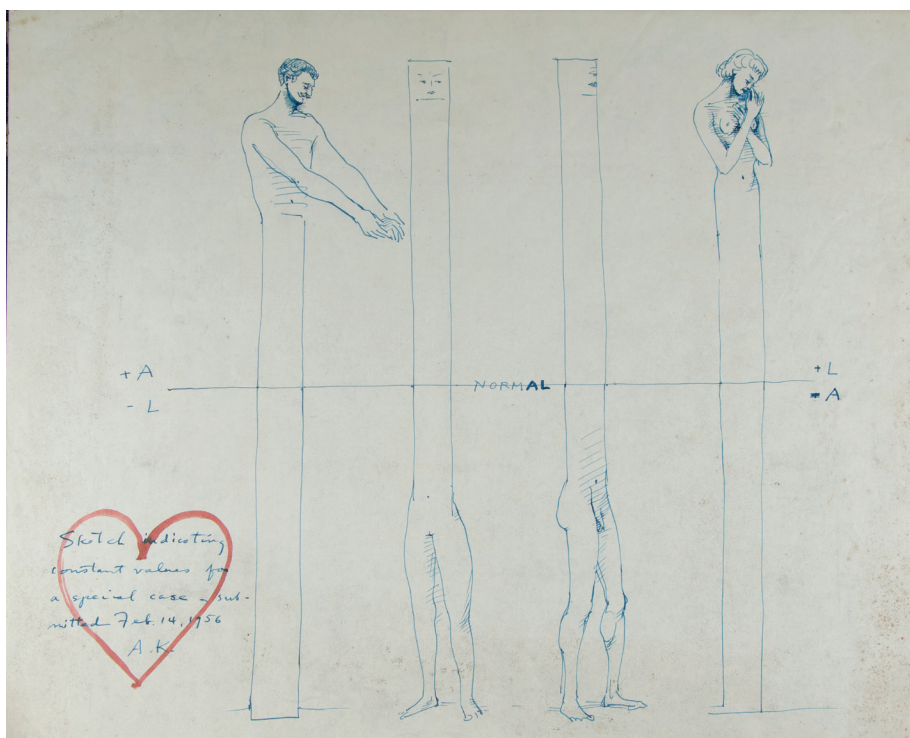
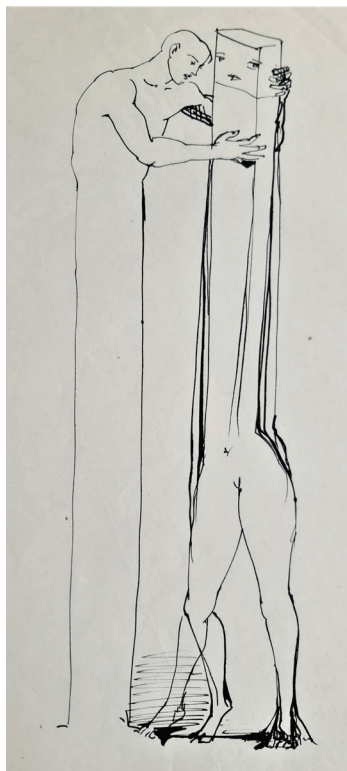
Valentina  
2000, metal

This is the second version of 'Valentina'. The first is the same size but of thinner metal. The last version, for Beatie is monumental and made of plywood





Acceptable only from passengers to whom issued, time limit on date of issue, at first point of intersect unless otherwise specified.



1956

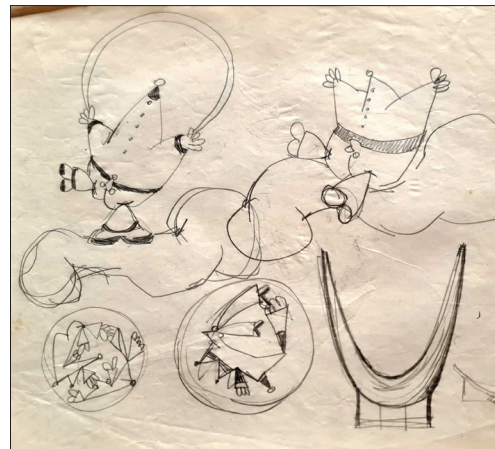


## Mexico

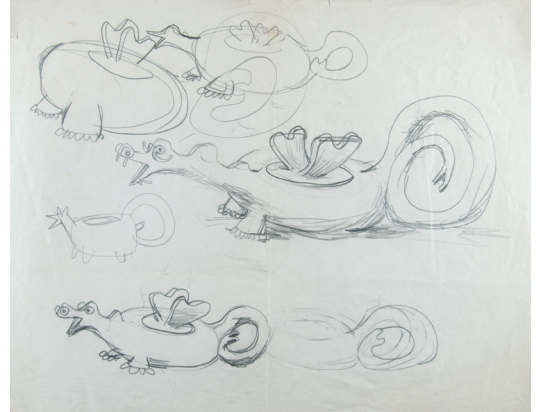
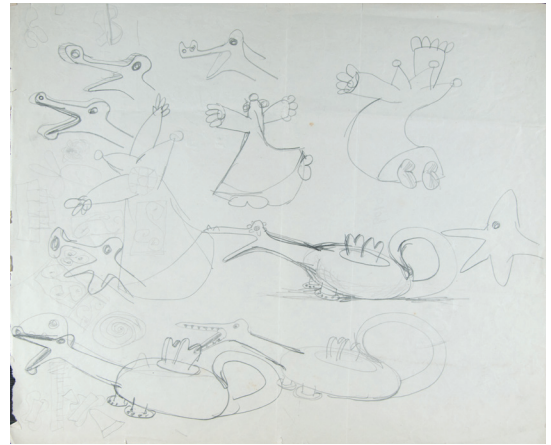
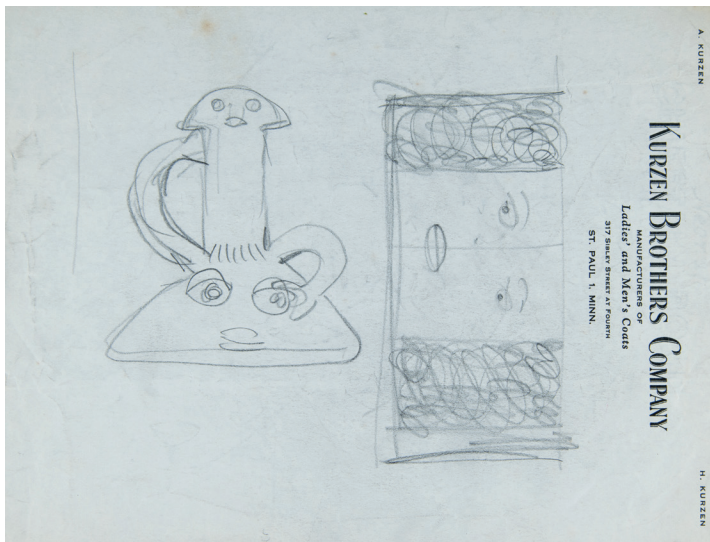
For a period in 1951 Aaron and Saja went to Mexico. There they were married - a marriage which remained, if not secret, at least mysterious thanks to Saja's secretive nature. Aaron studied ceramics and photography. Not all extant ceramics are shown here, and some may be lost.

The ceramic acrobats may be from Mexico, or made after the return to New York, or even prior to the trip. They are certainly more or less contemporaneous with the Mythics, some of which certainly date from after Mexico. This interlude, however, seems to mark an epoch for Kurzen, since the 'Column Figure' emerges upon his return, or even actually in Mexico as the drawing (right), a portrait of Saja, suggests (the erotic pitcher design is another manifestation of Kurzen's erotic inspiration).

If this square head is not yet a 'Column Figure' it is at least a departure from the 'Triangle Figure' and typical of the 'Column Figure' heads soon to come and relates to Kurzen's **'Boxtop'** self-portraits. The first true 'Column Figure' is a sculpture: a portrait of Saja.











Population Clown



Boxtop Self Portrait

24 x 30 oil on board, painted on sides, partly restored 2022



Most duchampian of Kurzen's works, 'AMORAL' is nonetheless utterly original. Simultaneously word and graphic play, it is also commentary on the contemporary situation of Art and a mysterious event: a postcard without a written address that is yet delivered: being post-marked it has gone through the mail.

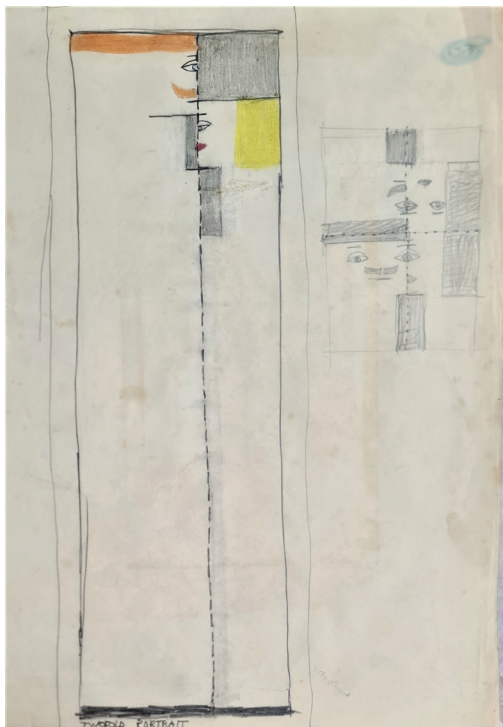
There exist several versions, but the one shown in the middle is the main one - a post-mark is essential to the piece.



## The Column Figures

After veering away from pure abstraction (see '**Lowest Extremities**' p96) and much experimentation, Kurzen arrived at his 'Column Figure' or the *dramatis personae* as vertical band. The first 'Column Figure' - according to Kurzen - was this semi-sculptural portrait of Saja which, if the date on '**Grand Entrance**' (or '**Actress**') is correct, dates from the summer of 1950, or possibly prior to Mexico - unless Kurzen did not consider '**Actress**' to be a 'Column Figure'. Be this as it may, the 'Column Figure', and a progressive resurgence of traditional figuration with a growing emphasis on what might be called 'metaphysical perspective', now dominates Kurzen's pictorial research. The '**Actress**' is certainly Saja - all the Column figures at this point seem to be portraits ('**A Kiss that is Heart to Heart**' p 36). Though her theatrical ambitions were frustrated her serious interest, particularly Greek drama, would be a growing influence on Kurzen and the major theme of the Column Paintings.

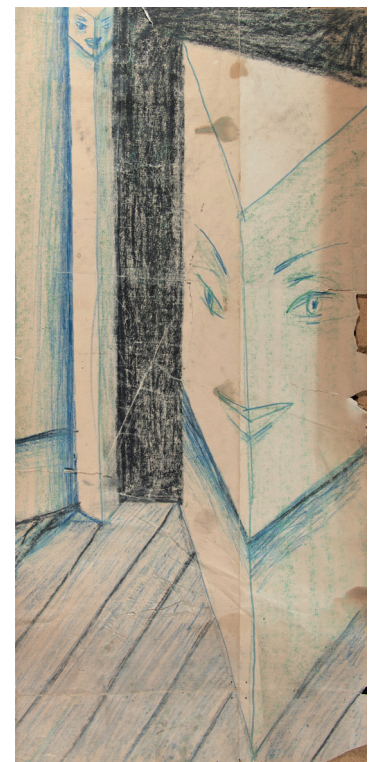
Note the non-profile eye in the '**Boxtop Self-portrait**' the single instance of this and which may signal a beginning of Kurzen's irresistible drift back to figuration.



Portrait of Saja  
(Woman with Daisy)  
96 x 11 x 2, oil on board



Grand Entrance (Actress)  
21 x 20, 3/19/48 - October 15, 1950





## 'El Tourista'

The first 'Column Painting' - as opposed to the first 'Column Figure', is, according to Kurzen, '**El Tourista**'. It includes artificial flowers of the type decorating tourist buses in Mexico. Why attached artificial flowers? Why not painted flowers? Robert Rauchenberg put this question to Kurzen who explained that painted flowers are already artificial flowers. Artificial flowers are therefore impossible to represent in painting; to make them present in a work one must include them as such. This insight was crucial for nascent Neo-dada, accounting for its use of collage, which is even its most characteristic feature.

Kurzen considered '**El Tourista**' to be one of his most important paintings. 50 years later he explored the possibility of a professional restoration. The sense of the historical and artistic importance of certain works in the context of the unfolding of time, or a fundamentally progressive attitude, was essential to Kurzen. This would be merely typical of his generation, and unsurprising given his exceptional openness to innovation and experimentation, were it not tempered by his desire for the past: "I want the new *and* the old!" he said. It is a tension which makes his work at once exceptionally rich, difficult to understand at a glance, and uniquely valuable as a lens on the 20th century adventure of Art.

The 'Column Figure' solution to the problem of abstraction, like the previous ones, quickly proved unsatisfactory. If columnar elements persisted in later work - manifested as 'metaphysical' book forms in the 'Diana' paintings for example - 'Column Figures' almost immediately sprang limbs to help dramatize love scenes and stories from classical mythology. But if the 'Column Paintings' are sober in tone, drawings of the period often are not; a mingling of tragic and comic, reflecting not only the influence of theater but Kurzen's innate broadness of mind.

'**Hotel Alpha**' may be contrasted with '**Triangle**' where a word not inscribed on a form, is allowed to float on the surface. In '**Hotel Alpha**' 'meaning' literally becomes 'form', a kind of play which engages contemporaneous painting ideology, namely how ab-

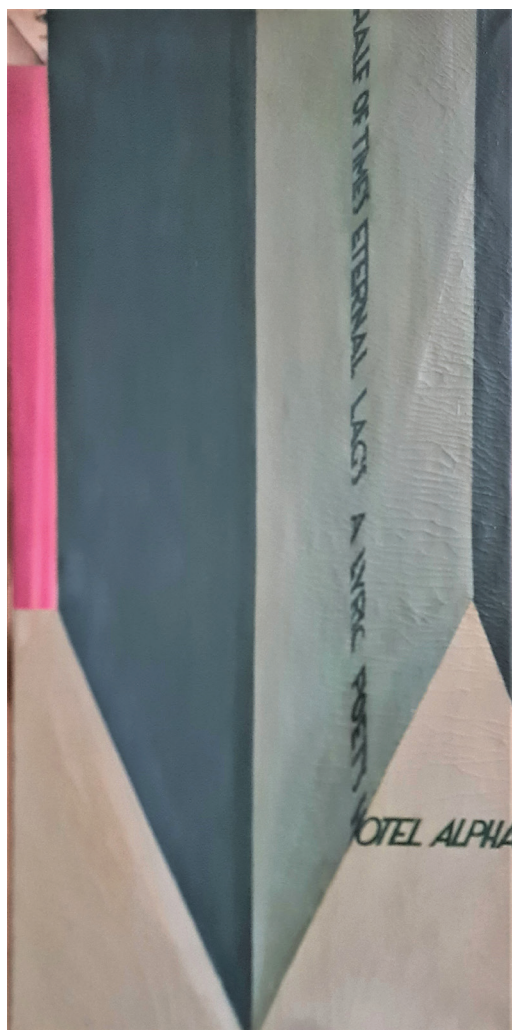
stracted painting forms or gestures were, and are still today, said to embody more or less conscious feelings and thoughts. The thought in this case seems to be that Eternity is divided in two by the existence of the artist - here a 'lyric poet' - at a point - a beginning for the poet, an initial place from which his transit begins - called 'Hotel Alpha'.

'**Sixty Nine Sanctified**' is another kind of mirror image and '**The Three Graces**' (p 44), are reflections on the material and spiritual, and the nature of artistic inspiration.



El Tourista, (A Guadalajara Summer)  
47½ x 84, oil on muslin - needs restoration





Hotel Alpha, 24 x 49



Sixty Nine Sanctified, 13x12, oil on tile



Triangle, 36 x 14







The Three Graces  
48 x 72, oil on masonite with mirror



## Zen Acre

In the early 1950s Kurzen began constructing Zen Acre, a project which occupied him for several years. Meanwhile his teaching career had already begun. His time was now divided three ways. Meanwhile Kurzen's art work was itself divided.

The paintings alternate between more or less 'pure' Column paintings and emerging figurative work, though both are dominated by mythological themes. The figurative aspect was certainly influenced by his teaching experience, particularly the constant society of adolescent girls, which eventually blossomed into drawings which Kurzen called '**Of the Metaphysics of Adolescence**'. As he later recounted, he suddenly became aware that the drawings of "girls and books" he was making were certainly the consequence of teaching at a girls school! These drawing eventually led to more or less coherent 'suites' treating mythological, artistic and personal themes (p 74 & etc.). Meanwhile sculpture had emerged as what Kurzen claimed was his major artistic mode; this was almost always 'assemblage'.

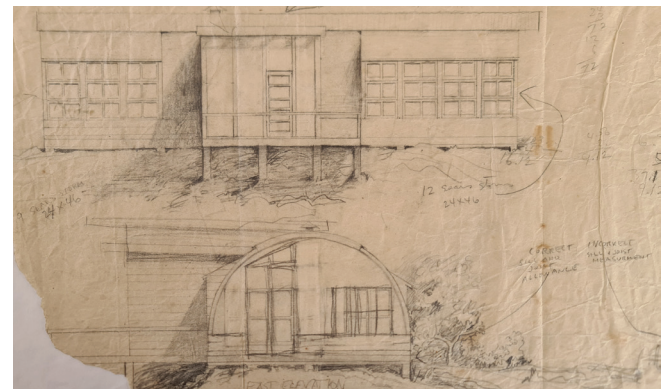
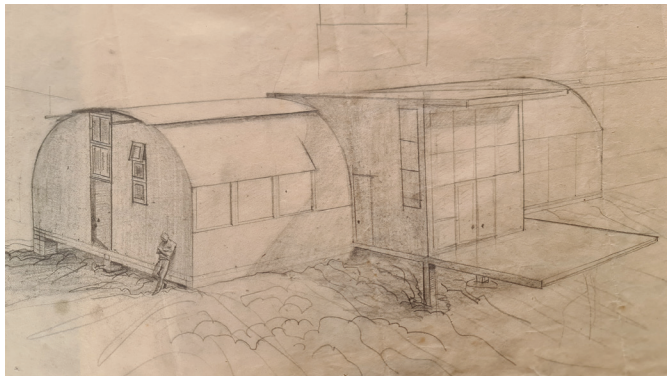
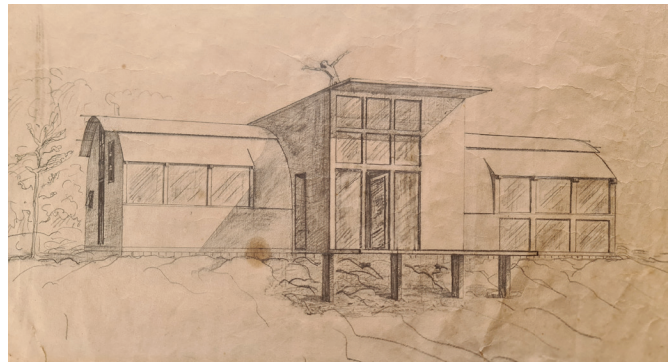
At the same time, as a teacher, Kurzen was developing painting exercises and methods of drawing instruction which involved demonstrations. Over the decades he made hundreds of tempera paintings and charcoal drawings some of which he considered his own finished work, and all of which may have considerable interest for us (p 105).

Kurzen explains in his writings that to bring students directly to art making, to a freeing creative experience, rather than subjecting them to tedious preparations and formulaic routines, it is important to use uncomplicated materials: charcoal, tempera, and inexpensive paper. Kurzen himself used these materials when teaching, so that his 'pedagogical' work is therefore now extremely fragile. In any case, from this time, and into the 1990s, Kurzen was constantly making pure abstractions ('Black and White' demos) and teaching life drawing, which for him always meant demonstration. Life drawing had been the basis of his own education under Booth and Vytlačil, as it was essential to Hofmann.



The simultaneity of these various modes of work during the three decades - between 1947 when Kurzen began teaching and 1976 when the **'Reconstructions'** show brought him into contact with holography - make his artistic development difficult to reconstruct - to say nothing of how the work is often un-dated, or of the injection of yet another mode, the satirical pieces characteristic of the shows **'Cool at 98.6 Degrees Fahrenheit'** (p 68) and **'Artists Save Face'** (p 75). The latter was the last artist collective organized by Kurzen. (He had organized two collectives of printers in the 1940s.)

One may regret Kurzen's obscurity but the multifariousness of his life and his work, and the true if hidden leadership and prominence he had in the experience of many artists and even on the art of his time, might yet be recognized and celebrated. That this exceptionally rich influence may be lost to others, that the eternal message of a lyric poet might not sufficiently 'lag', is a terrible thought.

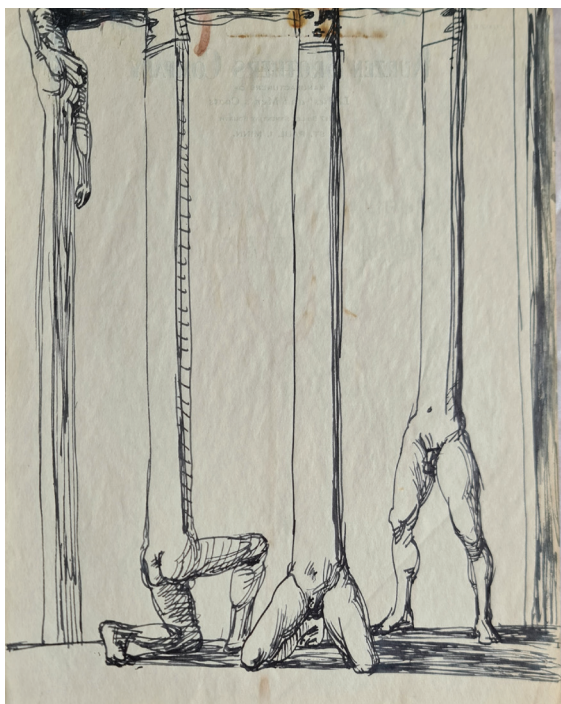


Underneath the Street Lamp  
(Lili Marlene)



Anatomical Comparative





Classical Indeterminables  
There is no Because to your Why  
Anti-Terminals  
18 x 28



Abominable Space Man

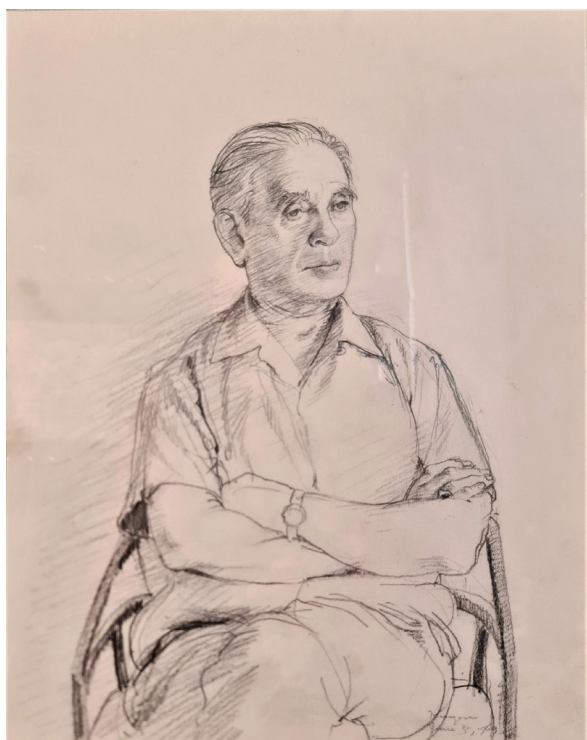


Rhinoceros  
R19 (need restoration)





The Genuine Article  
R12



Kurzen's parents R9  
about 9 x 12



## Critique and Auto-Critique

Is there another artist, of any time or place, who engaged in so much self-scrutiny and attention to his artistic situation, and in such an artistic manner? Kurzen's commentaries and critiques of his time are always auto-critique to begin with. If by the mid-sixties certain pieces might be seen as personal attacks on other artists, it may be asked if they are not justified?

Anyone who was there can attest that in the decades before the 1970s the influence of Picasso was often overwhelming, particularly in America. That the parrot, in **'At the Foot of the Master'**, is made of scissors shows that Kurzen points first at himself.

**'Portrait of a Vegetarian'** is a secondary title. Kurzen often retitled works, seeing more than one idea in an image. Beyond the joke of the original title, **'Self Serving'**, the artist's dreams of self-promotion are recognized. This is hardly unnatural, let alone unethical, but becomes an uncomfortable truth when Art is no longer the affair of artists, when a revolutionary broadening of terms can divorce it from poetic intent.

I suspect, for stylistic reasons, that **'Self Serving'** dates from 1961 or earlier. The dates of many of these pieces are uncertain; they are brought together on this page for thematic reasons, as on the next few pages.

As a found object **'Nu Facile'** (p 50) is in a category by itself. Neither object without aesthetic impact (Duchamp), nor a random and banal item promoted to 'Art' status by the sovereign choice of an Artist, it is instead the discovery, in the serendipitous conjunction of a shirt cardboard and a newspaper clipping, of a commentary on post-war modernism. The Hofmann type education which Kurzen and all the artists of his generation received, usually involving daily drawing practice for several years, is not in question. Simultaneously, that Kurzen, and we, recognize what Hofmann means is, at the very least, evidence of an evolution in our way of seeing for which early 20th century abstraction would seem to be responsible - for better or worse.

### **'Queen's Pawn Crowned'**

This portrait of Duchamp by his earliest and most ardent disciple has become an unhearable commentary on the use to which that artist has been put, and by whom. Chess interested Kurzen mostly because of Duchamp's obsession with the game. The drawings, below, certainly had Duchamp in mind. They are also 'surrealist' which for Kurzen points less to the Freudian unconscious than to his own sense of mystery.

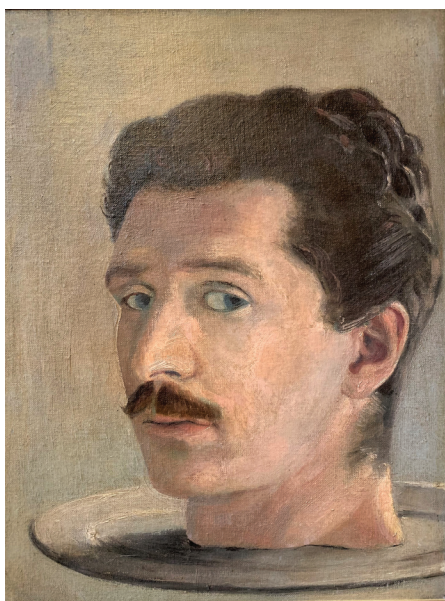
The use of shirt cardboards (see p 172) relates to Kurzen's father's business but also to his penchant for using unusual materials, particularly things found in everyday life. If **'The God of the Shirts'** is a type of '20th Century Aboriginalism', **'Sponsors of the New Establishment'**, is another example of Kurzen's mixture of gentle poetry and large or troubled themes, in an erotic, humorous and bleak look at the consumerism, industrialization, mechanization and depersonalization of contemporary life. It is as harsh a critique of society as **'Queen's Pawn Crowned'** is of the art world.







'God of the Shirts'  
'Votive Figure'



Self Serving  
Portrait of a Vegetarian  
12 x 15 ½

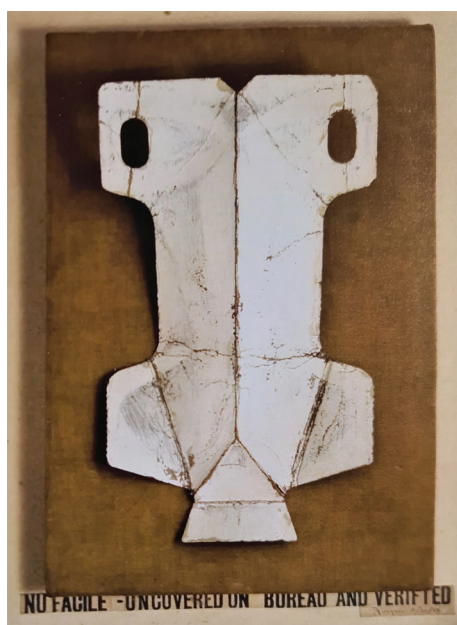


At the Foot of the Master





Foul Mouth  
potty, cigarillo holders, brush, boots



Nu Facile, 20 November 1954



Washburn  
glass table



Old Boot  
can, shoe, plaster





**'Last Laugh'**: this photo was used for the announcement of the 'Reconstructions' show in 1976. Kurzen certainly considered it to be one of his best works. One may hope it will be for Kurzen's unusual and unknown art.

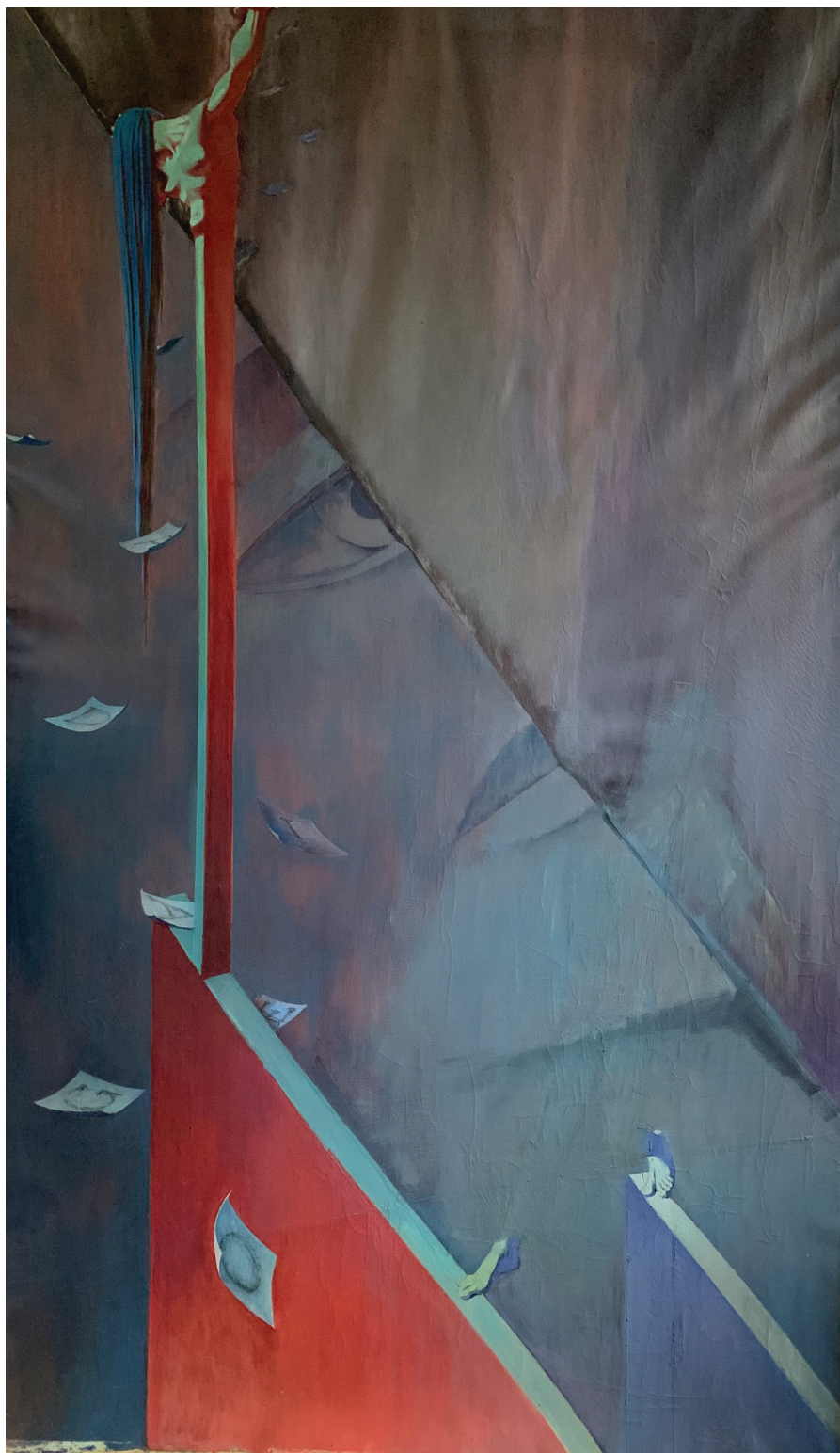


Wheeled Victory



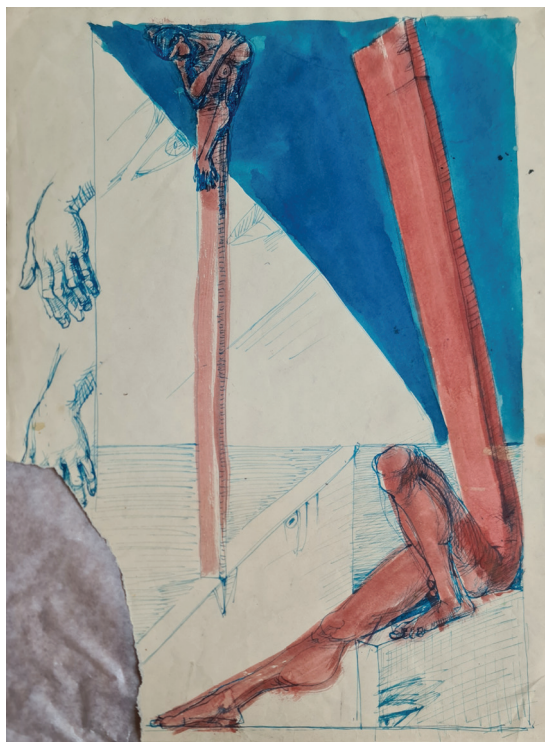
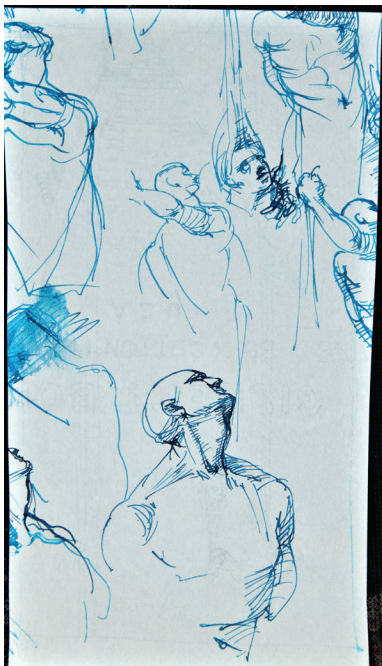
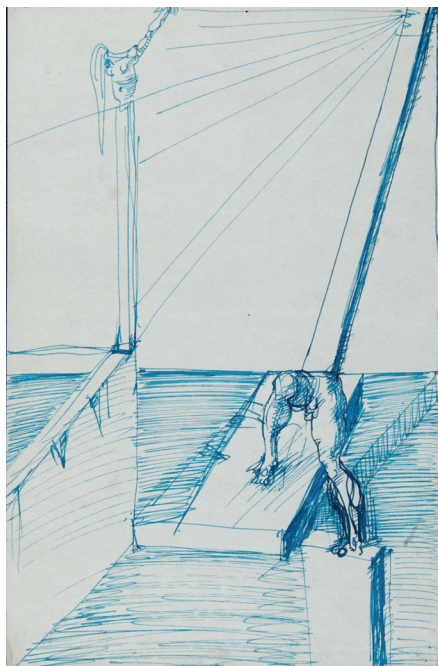
Mouli Maid (Rape of Europa)





Et in Arcadia Ego  
69 x 120, 1956 - 65, oil on canvas









Captor Captive, 24 x 28, 1959



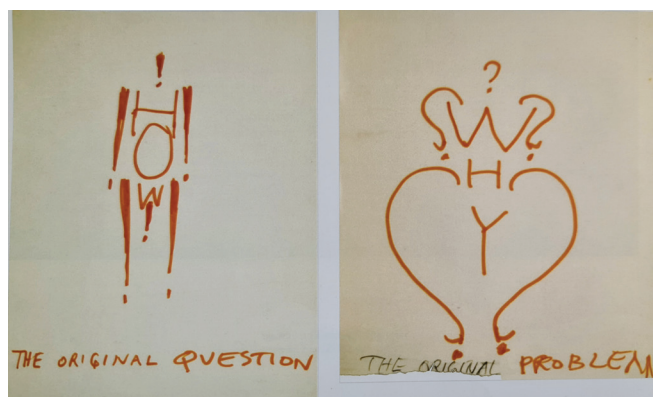
A Once and Future Child Bride  
52½ x 77, oil on canvas



## Male Sexuality

Kurzen's first drawing, at age 3 or 4 (see **AMUSE-UM**, p 6), as he pointed out to me, was "a big penis". The page also includes a drawing of female attributes. It would be ridiculous to pretend that Kurzen's art is dominated by or obsessed with sex. Still, the sexual aspect of things appears frankly.

Might 'See No Evil, Hear No Evil' (not shown) be a clue to Kurzen's attitude?



Nature Boy



Glover Boy



Lib Throne

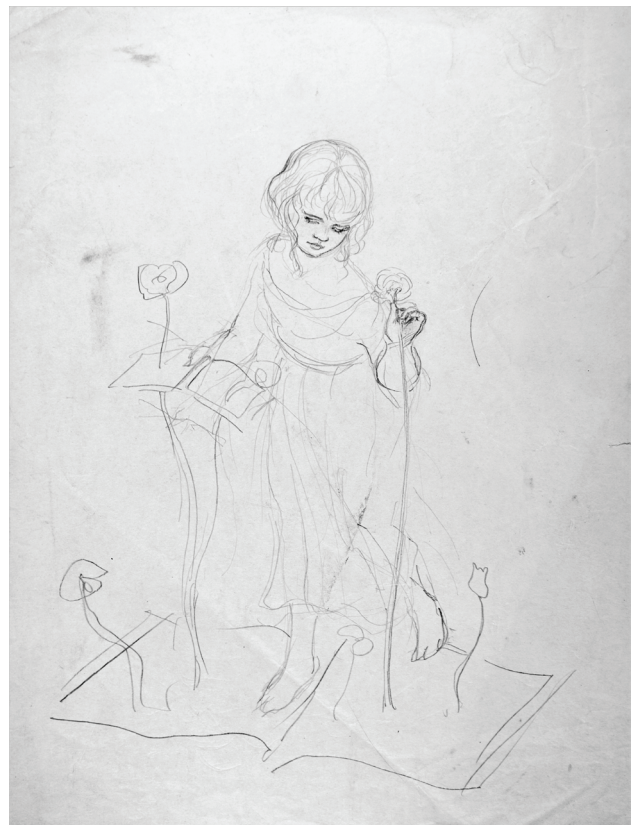




## Of the Metaphysics of Adolescence

Teaching in a girl's school, Kurzen eventually found himself drawing girls, often with books. In these drawings and the associated paintings, the Columns, having already become hermai, receded to become the 'metaphysical' environment. Looking at this evolution in another way, as the Columns now reverted to their origin, figures, so the books, particularly flying books reverted eventually to their classical starting point: putti.

Though Kurzen continued to make pure 'Column Figure' paintings, the 'Metaphysics of Adolescence' - figurative but surrealist - increasingly influenced the mood and mode of his painting, until the discovery of holography in the late 1970s.







Innocence, 50½x48½, 1962







SL & MD, Saja Laren and Marcel Duchamp, 30x36, 1960



Novel Seduction



Book Ends



## Translation

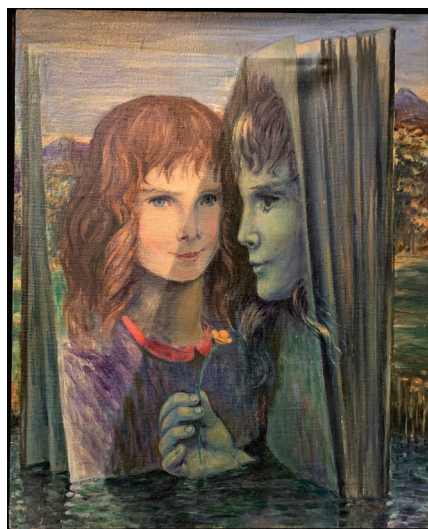
Kurzen considered '**Translation**' one of his most important paintings. Here the 'Column figure' is clothed in, or becomes, a dress, and for the first time the head is traditionally illusionist. Though it cannot be said that the 'Column paintings' are without 'light', the light in '**Translation**' is of a particularly atmospheric kind, and seems to prefigure the disembodied and mysterious quality of the holograms.



Translation, (large version)



Diana Repassage  
missing



Fictionalization, 14½ x 19



NORE D  
12 x 15, 1964-67



## Diana Paintings

The goddess Diana, athletic and virginal, is the 'classical' or 'antique' version of Kurzen's Dalton students - Dalton would only begin including boys in the high school in the late 1960s. The myth, or dream, of Saja's own eternal youthfulness however (p 54), or the couple's sense of themselves, is certainly the fundamental origin of the Diana paintings.



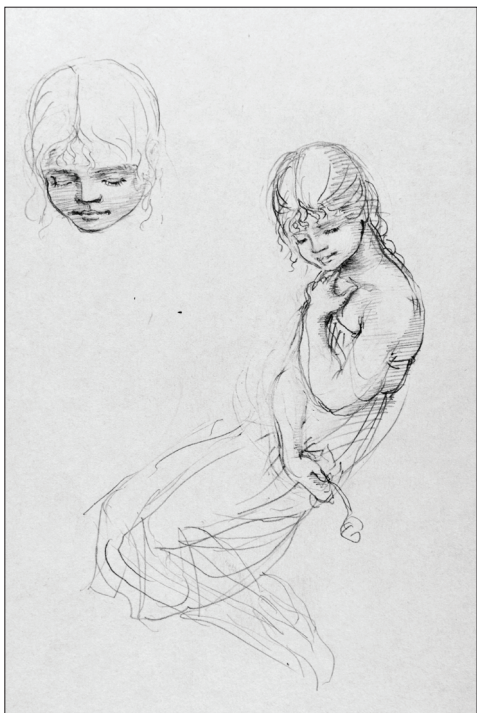
Detached Diana. 11x14, reworked in the 1980s



unfinished Diana, 14½x19, charcoal on canvas







Marble Diana



Diana Metaphysica, 14x17, 1962 - 65







Hera, 53 x 48, 1964-65 (compare Will Barnet)

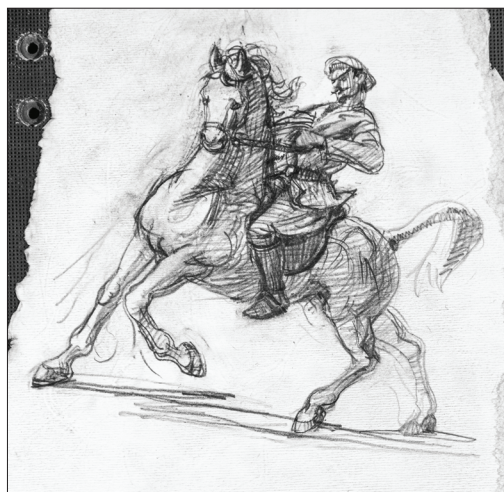


The Dioscuri, 34 x 52½





The Fencer, (Irving Podnos) 40x90, 1965, oil on canvas





## Reference

To say nothing of pervasive mythological and biblical subject matter, **'Indian Miniature'** (not shown) and the **'Kafka Sonata'** are examples of Kurzen's frequent reference to specific works of literature or art. Other examples include **'Intimations of Infinity'** (not shown), **'Nevermore'** (not shown), **'A Once and Future Child Bride'** (p 54), **'Don Quixote and Rosinante'** (not shown) and **'Portrait of the Young Man as an Artist'** (p 93). References to specific paintings or kinds of art include **'Portrait of a Portrait'** (p 11), **'Et in Arcadia Ego'** (p 52), **'Wheeled Victory'** (p 51), **'Relief of Violence'** (p 87), **'Why Not Smile'** (p 91) and, of course, **'The Whole Warhol'** (p 69).

The **'Singing Kettle'**, like **'Java Man'** and **'Al Dente'** (not shown) or **'Glover Boy'** (p 55) references the materials of the piece itself.\*

Only one of these pieces can be dated with confidence: **'Giorgio's Return'**. It is a Valentine for Saja which commemorates the di Chirico retrospective (1972) in NYC. Kurzen became friendly with di Chirico during the war. Di Chirico urged Kurzen to return to Italy and study with him: Kurzen regretted not having done so. He had been influenced by the prejudice against di Chirico for his traditionalist turn at that time.

The **'Bambara Kickback'** relates to 20th Century Aboriginalism but is probably part of Kurzen's reaction to the art world evolutions in the 1960s. The **'Red Flyer'**, also made from bicycle parts, is notable in that it uses a whole tricycle and nothing else. The **'Keeper of the Mascot'**, like **'New Home Charioteer'** (not shown) and two other pieces (opposite) is one of Kurzen's few assemblages made of disparate items some without apparent relation to the idea, though the piece does include sports equipment. The charm and humor of the ensemble are its justification.



Giorgio's Return



Keeper of the Mascot





Bambara Kickback



Kafka Sonata



Red Flyer



Dangerous Domestic



## Pop-Satire

Kurzen's overriding concern was art itself, art in the sense of poetry. Still, he held definite political views and, though certainly no activist, his views occasionally erupted in works like **'Bedroom Dinosaur'** (Viet Nam era anti-war piece, not shown) or political cartoons (not shown). More frequently he indulged in social observation (e.g. **'Lib Throne'** p 55), **'Sponsors of the New Establishment'** p 50, or 20th Century Aboriginalism in general). The **'Wanted'** poster lampoons a major social trend: the 'spirituality' of the 1960s. But if political and social criticism are not major currents, as already noted, Kurzen often observed, satirized or even denounced artistic developments. With the advent of pop and neo-dada in the 1960s this emerges strongly.

There are at least 4 version of **'Monet is Money'**. Like **'Queen's Pawn Crowned'** (p 49) the **'Fresh Pose Card'** denounces establishment exploitation of his hero, Marcel Duchamp, in a duchampian manner.

**'Legend'**, rife with overtones, can be understood as an analysis, critique or lament, concerning not only the late 20th century art scene, but art generally. In that sense it is one of Kurzen's most characteristic pieces.



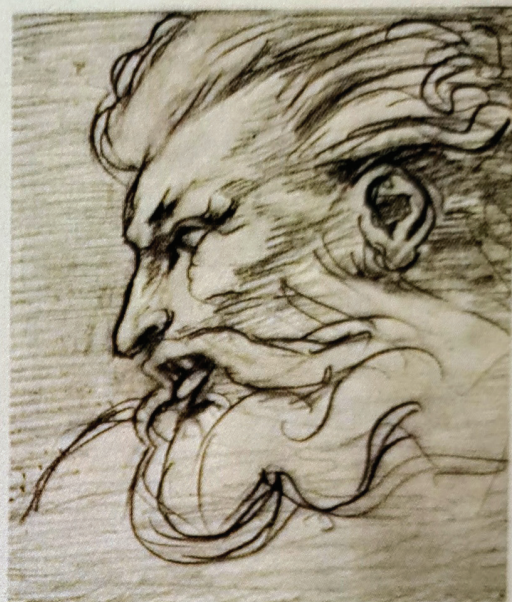
Legend



Fresh Pose Card  
(DOUCHE CHAMP)



# WANTED



D.O. Mio alias G.O. Dee alias G. Hova alias  
G. Zeus alias Al Lah alias Bud Dha alias  
V. Shnu, etc.

## DEAD OR ALIVE

### JUST REWARD

FOR **HIS** APPREHENSION  
OR INFORMATION LEADING  
DIRECTLY THERETO.







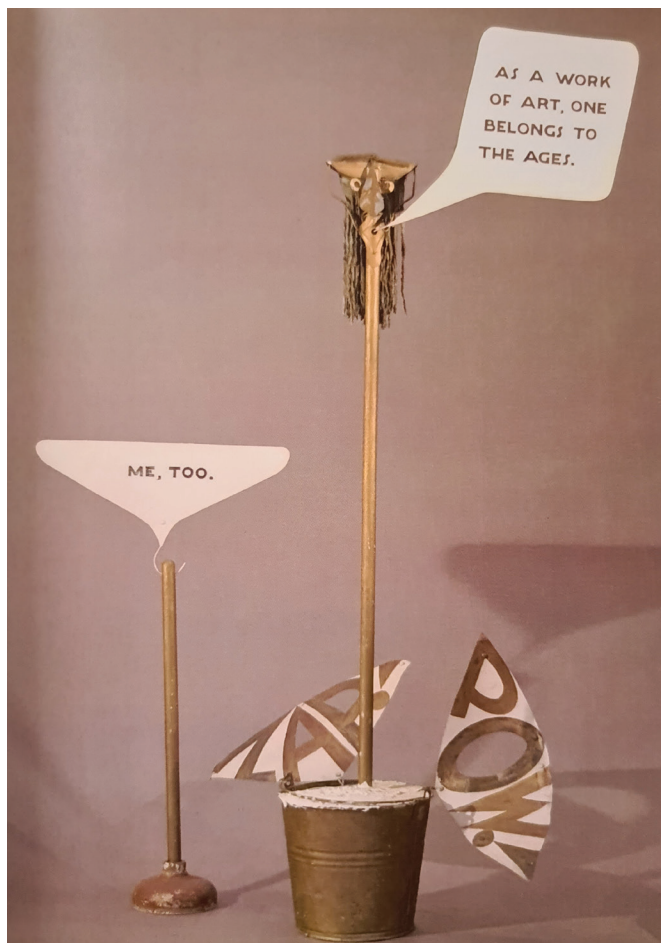


Bianale or Bust (kinetic sculpture: spins frantically)  
"BIANALE" on other side of pennant

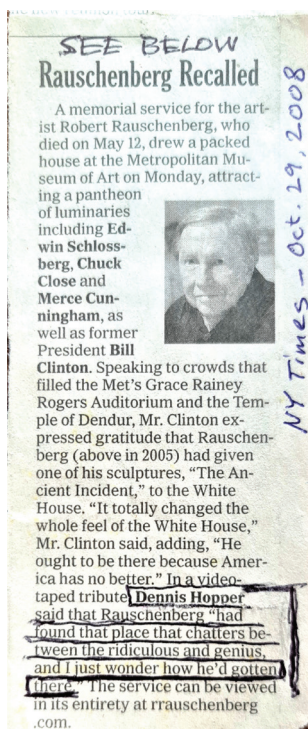


The Whole Warhol  
26 x 54, 1966, oil on board, restored, 2022  
Emblem reads:

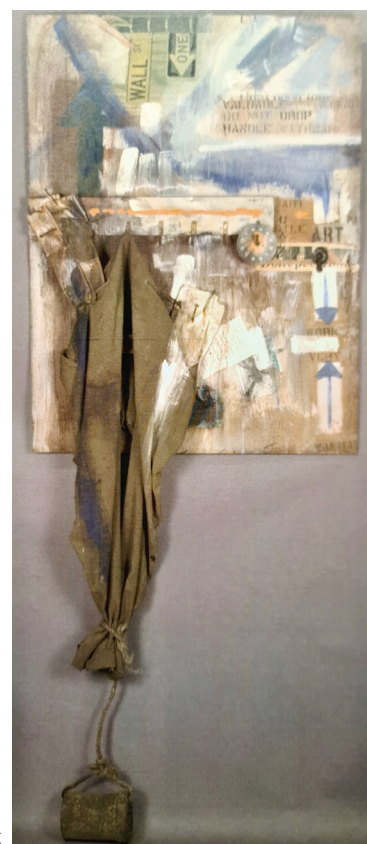
EXPOSÉ UNIVERSELLE INTERNATIONALE 1966



Mopman and Plunger



Underline by Kurzen is answer to question posed by Hopper.



Only for Investment

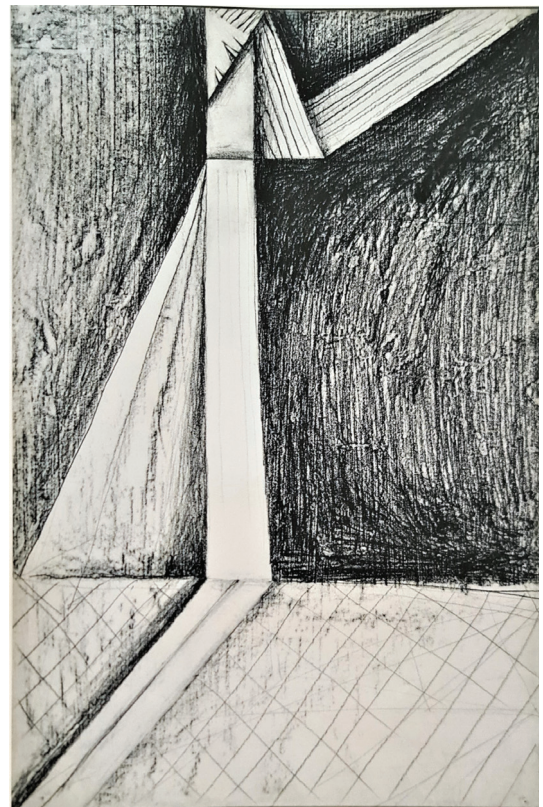
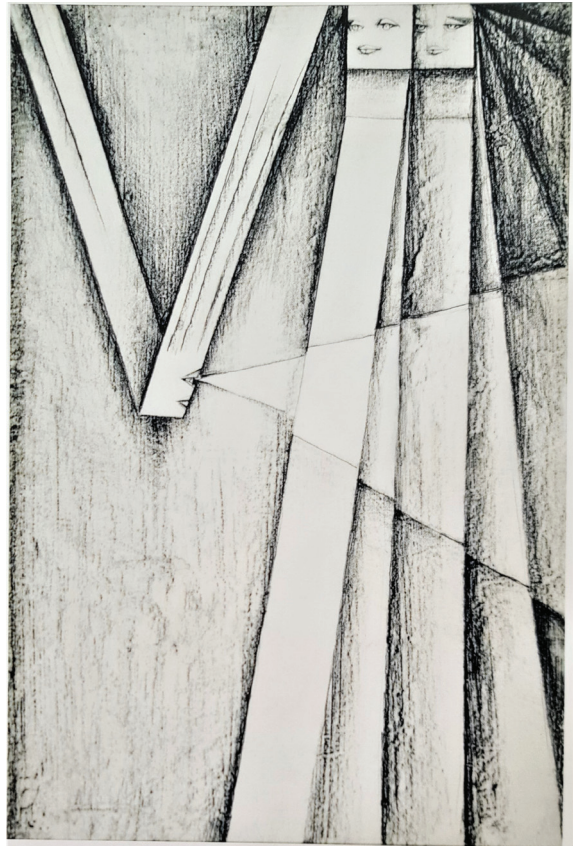


## Late Column Drawings

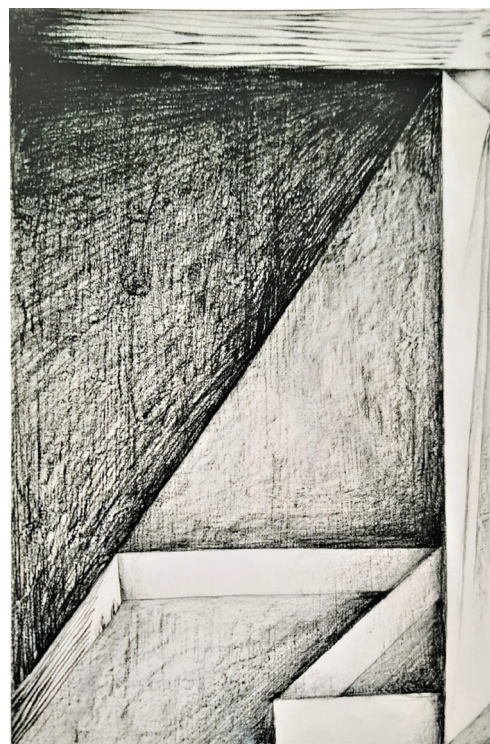
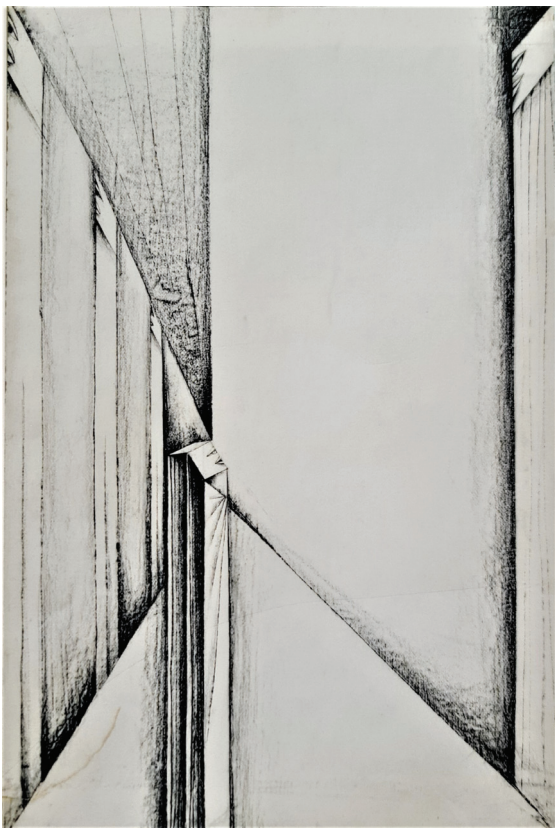
This series of very large framed Column drawings seem to be from the late 1960s or later. The diagonality of certain figures, the bending and folding of the columns and relief character of the space distinguish them from earlier Column drawings and prefigure the zig-zagging lines and spatial adventurousness of the final paintings.

In the 1990s - after the demise of the Museum of Holography and Kurzen's final holographic projects - rather than to 'Diana' or other figurative type painting - Kurzen returned to 'Column Figures' in his late work. If the last of those paintings do not have 'Column Figures' per se they are certainly part of Kurzen's 'Column Figure' inspiration.

During the hologram period (1976 - 1991?) Kurzen was also doing figurative work, notably '**Portrait of the Young Man as an Artist**' (p 93) as well as endless hours reworking '**Detached Diana**'. Kurzen was constantly revising older work and updating old modes.









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# ARTISTS SAVE FACE

## The Death of The Avant-Garde and The Arrival of The Arriere-Garde



ROBERT CASEY



AARON KURZEN



HOWARD FUSSINER



JEFF LONDON



JOAN GARDNER



NICHOLAS ORSINI



HENRY GORSKI



JACK SMITH



KEITH HATCHER



SUSAN WEIL (Kirchenbaum)



Not the spiral caresses of the Guggenheim Museum;

not the loving, way-out square bosom of that mad madam of Madison Avenue, the Whitney Museum;

not the smothering mothering of MOMA\*, have succeeded in preventing our beloved Avant-Garde from dreary suicide in the psychic desert of reductivism.

What has thus ended so low in the tired, over-protective arms of MOMA\*, seems, in truth, to have begun on a fantastic high in the bracing happy-go-lucky arms of DADA. As for periodic exhortations from the supporting Arriere-Garde, they were truly "a voice in the wilderness." So perhaps what has happened had to be. Already the bleak and elegant bones of Barnett Newman, the mysterious black bones of Ad Reinhardt, and even the still living silvery-soft skin of Andy Warhol, superstar, are sunk deep in the desert sand those towers of Babel, Art News, Art Forum, Art International, et al, notwithstanding.

The Avant-Garde is dead! Long live the Arriere-Garde!

Ill-sorted, ragtag, disorderly, but far removed from the satanic blandishments of these sirens of official art, the Arriere-Garde remains high-spirited and uncorrupted. Having salvaged practically everything our late Avant-Garde threw so thoughtlessly away, the Arriere-Garde is avidly restoring it all, for the Rear-Guard is affirmative and is determined to reclaim the desert. Everything shall be put back; our esthetic-psychic desert will bloom again. Of course vestigial vestals of "less is more" and "nothing is everything" will continue to wander aimlessly about; of course the weeds of Wyeth, like the dandelions of Dali, will continue to proliferate, but the marvelous thing will be to see again the lilies of genuine inspiration. Patience! For they, too, shall reappear.

Artists from the Arriere-Garde deny reaction. They aren't "returning" to anything; they are simply affirmative. True, they are non-movement, non-program, non-doctrine, but, what is more important, they are pro-content, pro-meaning, pro-imagery, pro-subject matter, pro-representation, pro-artistic license, pro-plasticity, pro-all media, pro-poetry, pro-nostalgia, pro-Godliness (whatever that may be and despite His alleged demise) pro-light-heartedness, pro-seriousness, pro-light-hearted seriousness and pro-serious light-heartedness, pro-loving

\* Museum of Modern Art

ness, pro-decency, pro-caring, pro-humaneness, pro-loving individualism, pro-loving subjectivity, pro-loving objectivity, pro-loving comedy, pro-loving wit, pro-loving satire, pro-loving involvement, pro-loving non-involvement, pro-loving nuclear family, pro-loving non-family, pro-loving lib movements, pro-loving hot and pro-loving cool, pro-doing your own loving thing, pro-kissing and making up, pro-Buddha, pro-Mohammed, pro-Lao Tzu, pro-Jesus, pro-Moses, pro-Krishna, pro-Hermes Trismegistus, and pro-all loving attitudes. This is what bestows the rightful arrival of the Arriere-Garde and what slakes the rightful thirst and what will yield the rightful genius.

Concerning the present exhibition, it might be pointed out that just as the automobile can never undermine the shoe industry, the camera will never eliminate our need or desire for portraiture in painting and sculpture. (Obviously, it ought to have done away with the need for the hack variety, but, curiously, it hasn't even succeeded in that.) But creative portraiture, wherever and whenever we find it, will always hold our interest and elicit gratitude. In taking up the human visage and the human condition as reciprocal factors of our awareness, the artist—especially when he confronts his own countenance, is dealing with one of the most revealing and timeless challenges in the history of art. All art is primarily revelation, but, inevitably, it also includes self-revelation of the artist who, in working, is the messenger. Thus, the self-portrait becomes compound self-revelation. In this, perhaps, lies its special fascination.

The title of this exhibition may be read simply as an eye-catching joke. Certainly it is supposed to be that, for Rear-Guard artists are also pro-fun and jokes, undoubtedly the value for which dear old DADA is most lovingly remembered. Nevertheless, in the full sense it also intends to suggest the dedication of the exhibition to the arrival of the Arriere-Garde — just in the nick of time.





## False Dutch Master

In or around 1970 Kurzen organized a group of New Haven area artists into the 'Arriere-Guard', which lasted for one show: 'Artists Save Face'. For that show Kurzen made 'False Dutch Master', or perhaps the show was made for the piece. In any case to promote the show he wrote this impassioned broadside in which we see his desire *for the new and the old*, his loyalty to the *old* 'Avant-Guard' and Dada, which he proclaims betrayed, and his unapologetic love of representation, story, and humor.

I doubt many of the participants shared all the sentiments and ideas Kurzen expresses here, to say nothing of the depth of his engagement with Art. In any case the 'Arriere-Guard' was never heard from again. Even so, as with 'Cool at 98.6° fahrenheit' the ironic demand: *international recognition for all artists who want it badly enough*, is a critique of the contemporary art scene it will never face



because to do so would destroy it.

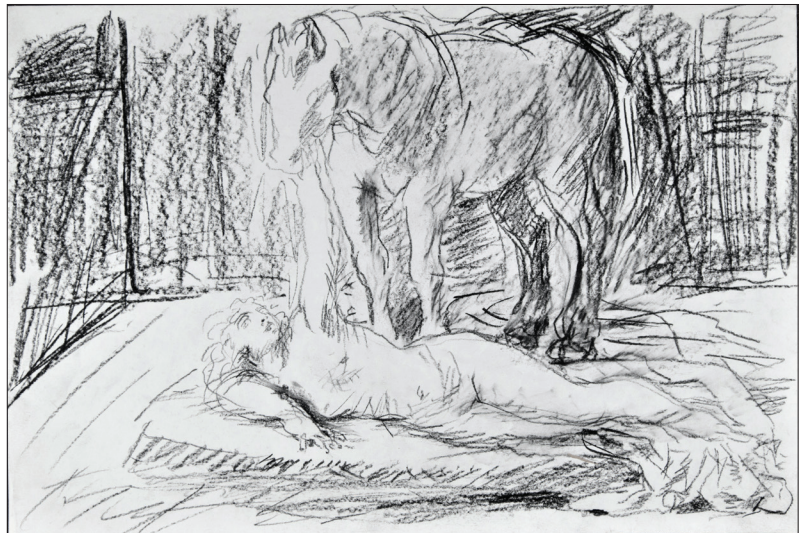
As for 'False Dutch Master' (if the photo is not clear, the 'cigar' is a 'Dutch Master' made of wood), the accumulation of reference, cross and double references, jokes in good and bad taste and ideas and suggestions of all kinds, is such that one hardly knows where to begin, and indeed I will not, except to opine that it is among the most remarkable and memorable artifacts of the 20th century.



## The Drawing Suites

These drawings which grow progressively out of the 'Metaphysics of Adolescence', emerge around 1970 with, apparently, this series of girls with horses. It is not a new theme. The interest in horses is certainly a legacy of Cameron Booth. The theme here appears clearly in its sexual aspect, particularly in 'L'.

The only dated drawing is 1974. 'M' was framed and displayed in the 2d av. loft possibly as early as 1976. As the suites progress into the 'Artist and Model' phase, there are obvious self portraits: 'K' and 'L'. In the latter Saja is the model. Most astonishing of this group is 'J': the model appears to have murdered the artist, while the spirit carries on the work (next pages).



L



M







Allegory of Air, 36½ x 44½, 1967





## The Model, and Artist and Model







K



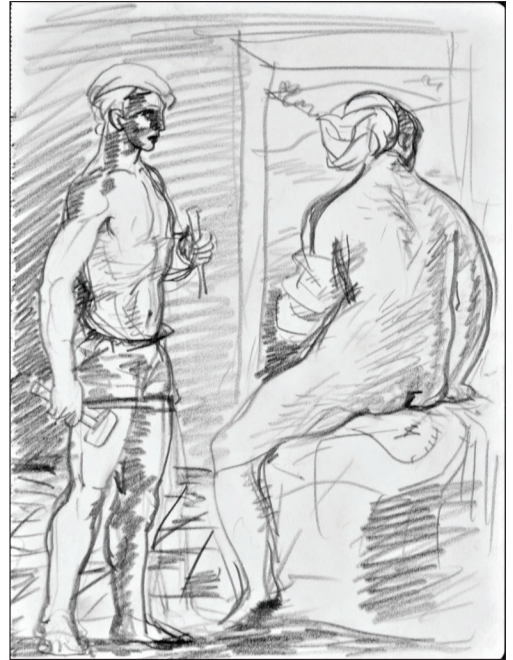
L



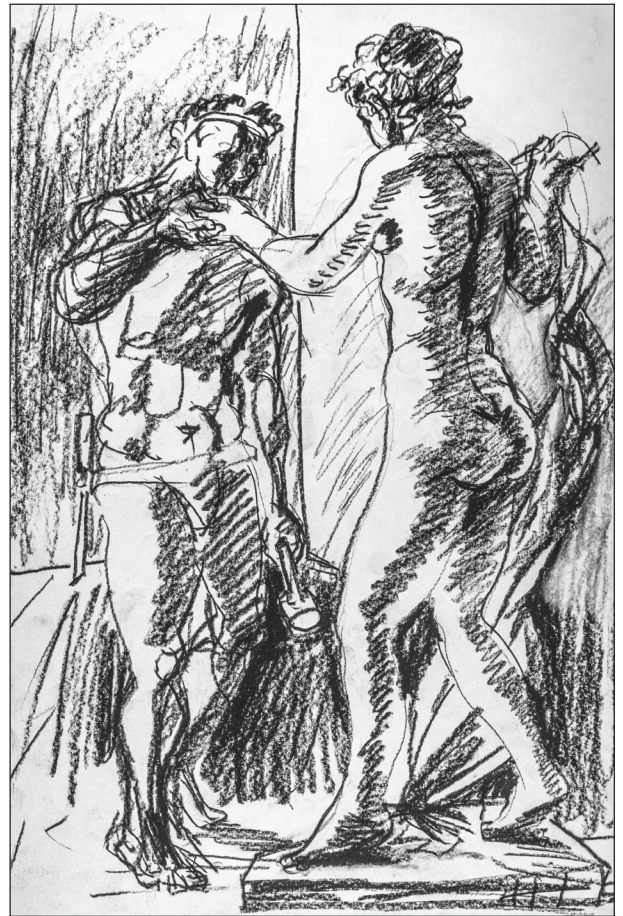
J



## Pygmalion







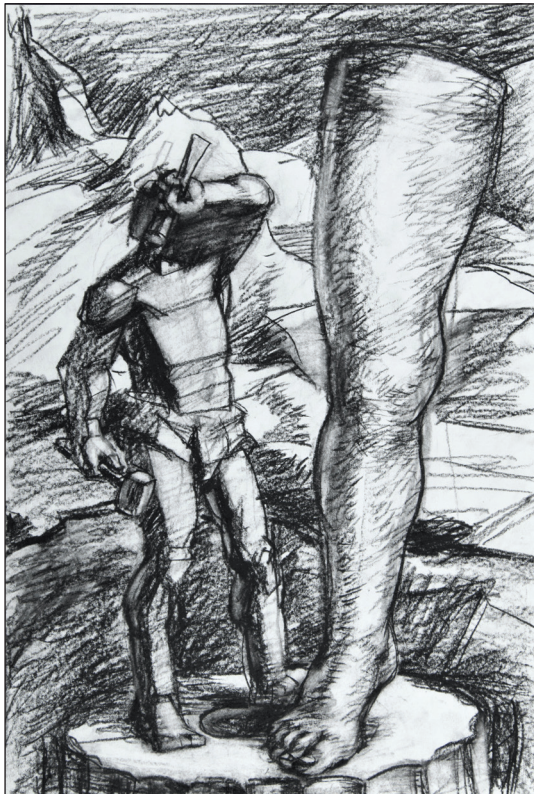


## The Artist Alone

Kurzen, as he told me more than once, considered himself principally a sculptor. The 'Pygmalion suite', therefore has particular autobiographical significance. The heroic artist, not only unaided - except in one case - but alone labors at a monumental work. He is sometimes lost in his task, sometimes resting or contemplating, sometimes exhausted or even discouraged. The monument is sometimes in pieces, sometimes carved into the earth, often strange or obsessional. It does not seem far-fetched to consider these drawings a reflection of Kurzen's inner states in regard to his own work which, like the incomplete, strange or disjointed monuments of these drawings, exist in a desolate region of heroic and mystical grandeur. As in Pygmalion drawing 'N', so here in drawing 'P' the artist is more work of art than his sculpture, reflecting a frequent remark of Kurzen's, that everything we do is really about "honing our souls".









## Corybants

A pair of dancing women is one of Kurzen's oldest ideas (see '**Gay Gals**'). These drawings, now the living sculpture, the model transfigured into living art, strong with classical references, cause one to wonder, given the number of classically oriented, or antique (Greek) inspired works among the juvenilia, if a classical inspiration was not also at work in 1946.

Notable in these drawings are the expressions of many of the women. Some are dreamy or contemplative while others are searching, knowing or even sardonically amused.







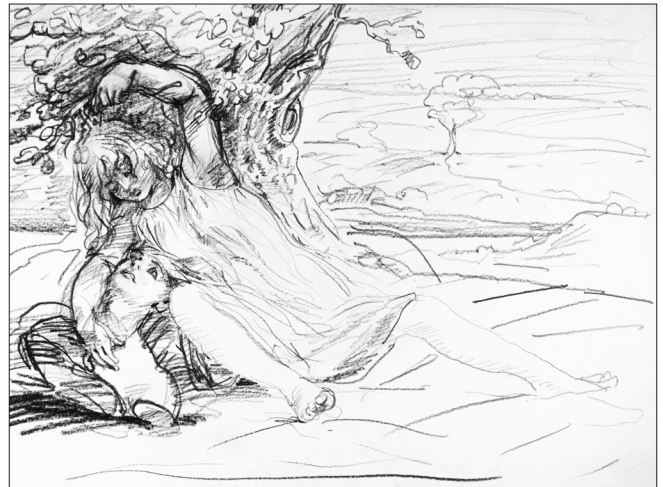


## Greek Mythology

Here are evocations of the mythical Greek world of painting imagination. It recalls Poussin's inspiration. The theme of the nymph and satyr is the essential version of the artist and model (this is explicit in 'F'), of which Pygmalion is a special version. These drawings therefore partake of the *love* and *art* themes so prevalent in Kurzen's oeuvre. There is also an inversion of the Pygmalion idea in 'A', of which Narcissus - 'C' - is a further variation. The evocation of Poussin's '**Et in Arcadia Ego**', 'C', is a theme also treated in the 1950s (p 186). 'D' suggests Spartan girls, a drawing which seems related to both Poussin and Degas. 'E', the philosopher and young voyaging aspirant suggests an auto-biographical reflection. Kurzen, at this time, often evoked his age to me, and of course was intensively a mentor of mine, in particular, but also of his many students in general. The aspirant would be an evocation of his younger self.



D



A



B





C



F





## The Comedy of Age

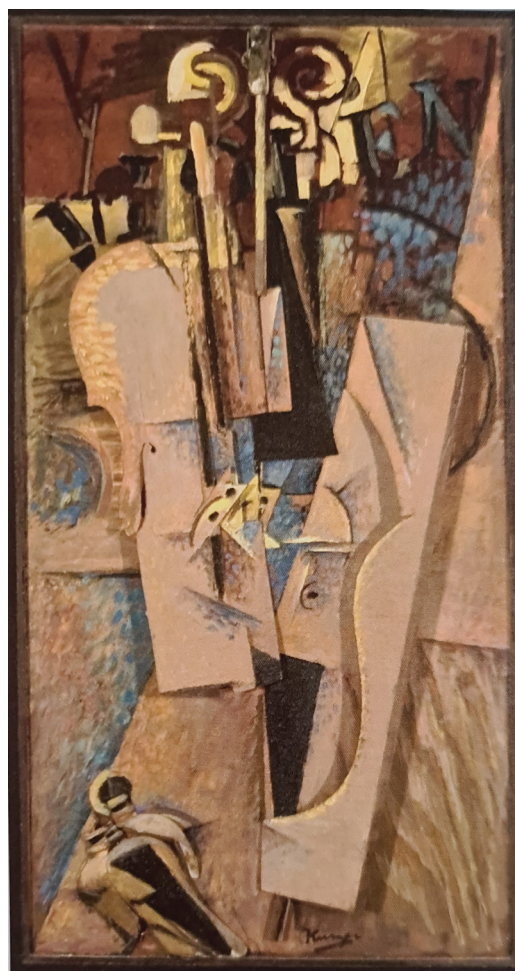
Here are most of the themes from the suites transposed to the tonality of old age.





he **'Relief of Violence'** (1975), an homage to Picasso in the year of his death, is also a critique of cubism. Cubism indeed does violence to its subjects in favor of a relief-like sculptural space, which Kurzen emphasized in his teaching. Picasso's death also may bring us relief from something related to these things.

The **'Studio Guitar'** (1990), made from jetsam in the Dalton art room, is a work Kurzen kept on display at Zen Acre. It exemplifies many of his values: cherishing of the past (cubism in this case), spontaneous creativity, serendipitous discovery in unlikely things, poetry and humor arising out of humble materials.



**Relief of Violence**  
20 x 32½, 1975-80, oil on board,  
with attached violin and bottle parts in relief



**Studio Guitar**  
1990, made at Dalton art studio



## HOLOGRAMS in ASSEMBLAGE

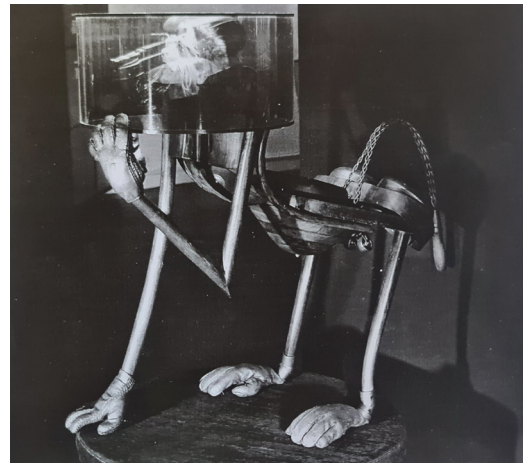
'**Primal Manifestation**' is Kurzen's first 'holograms in assemblage'. Amusing that his first use of this new technology should be an evocation of the pre-historic and even pre-rational.

Kurzen's holograms-in-assemblage are of two types: either they use holograms made specifically for a piece, as with '**Primal Manifestation**' or they used 'found' holograms. The latter were preexisting holographic films made by others which Kurzen re-purposed. '**Voodoo Dali**' used a 'found' holographic head of Salvador Dali, which was given to him but subsequently taken back. Kurzen substituted the '**Primal Manifestation**' hologram but this piece, to be complete, should have the Dali hologram. '**Chalice**' uses a hologram made for '**Primal Manifestation**', but rejected for that piece so it is, in '**Chalice**' a 'found' hologram. '**Aquaduction**' uses a hologram of the '**Mouli Maid**'. '**Unbirthday Cake**' uses an original hologram of burning candles. This piece is a collaboration with Pat Lasch who made the cake. '**Lighthearted Consumption**' is Kurzen's most ambitious holographic work: a butterfly rises through a ring of burning candles, transforms into a heart and bursts into flame at which point a blue light bulb, inside which this action has taken place, illuminates and obliterates the spectacle. The apparatus with which Kurzen made the original holographic film is extant. All the above holograms are 'integral holograms' which must be supported on a circle or semi-circle of clear plexiglass and activated by an straight-filament incandescent 'reference' lamp from above or below. These holograms can display motion.

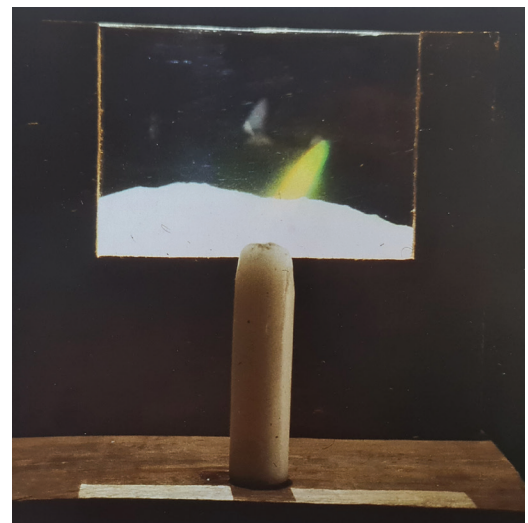
The last holograms were of a different sort: they can also show motion but are mounted flat, and the placement control of the reference lamp is more critical. I believe that '**One Candle Power**' was the original of the group, so that the others are 'found' holograms in the same way '**Chalice**' may be said to be: Kurzen made the holographic film but then used it in assemblages for which it was not originally intended. The distinction between 'original' and 'found' holograms was important to Kurzen because such distinctions were important to Duchamp but also because the 'found' aspect emphasizes the spontaneous and serendipitous aspect of the work, a surrealist quality.

'**Why Not Smile**' references Duchamp's 'Why Not Sneeze' as well as 'Razée'. It is neither cynical and destructive, nor a quiet and inquiet admonition, but a message of confidence and hope. It is interesting that of the more or less twenty of Kurzen's 'holograms in assemblage', five, or one quarter, involve flame. and one has a bowl of non-virtual water.

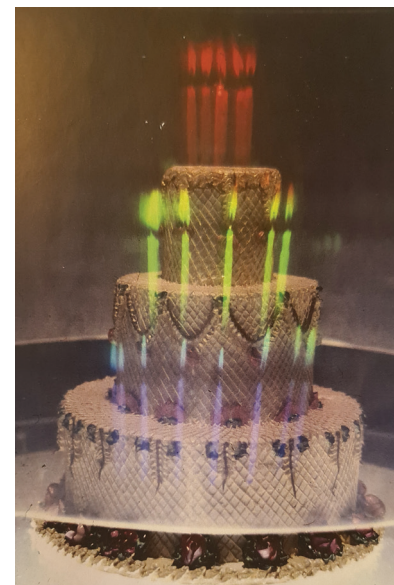
Most of these pieces will need some degree of restoration and research to pair reference lamps and/or replacement films with their assemblages.



Primal Manifestation



One Candle Power

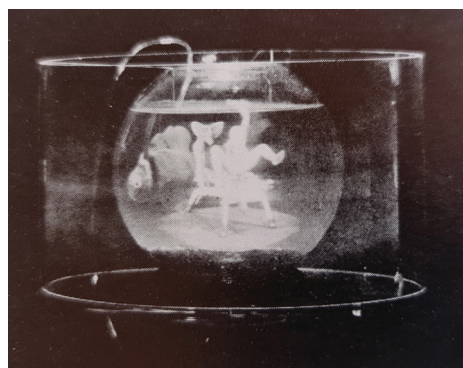


Unbirthday Cake (cake by Pat Lasch)

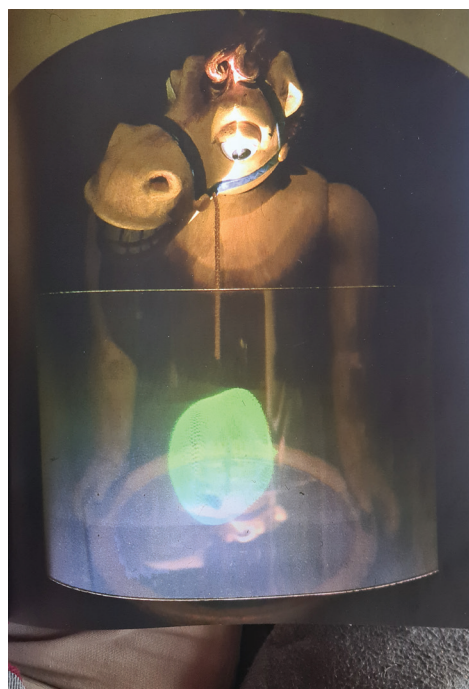




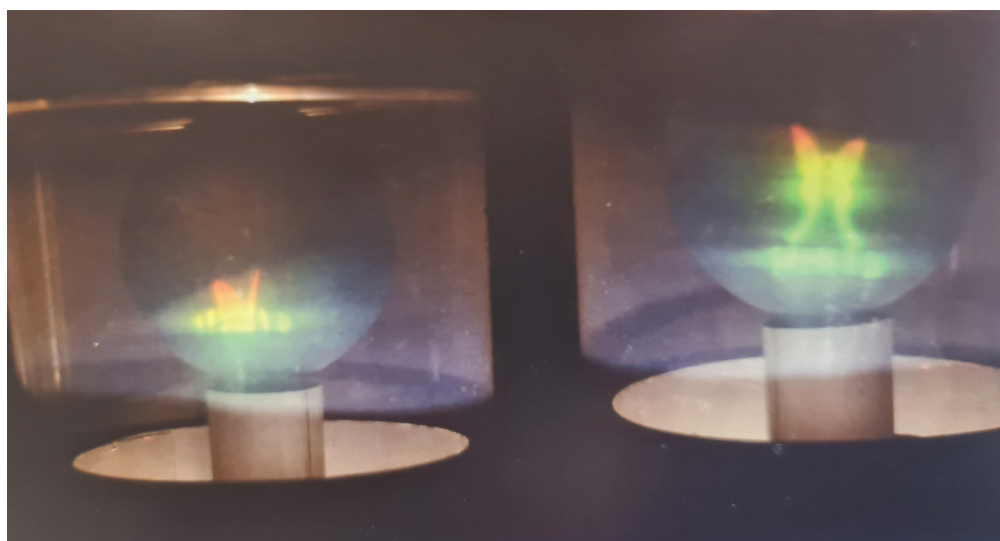
Chalice (1977)



Aquaduction



Venusian Metatoy



Lighthearted Consummation

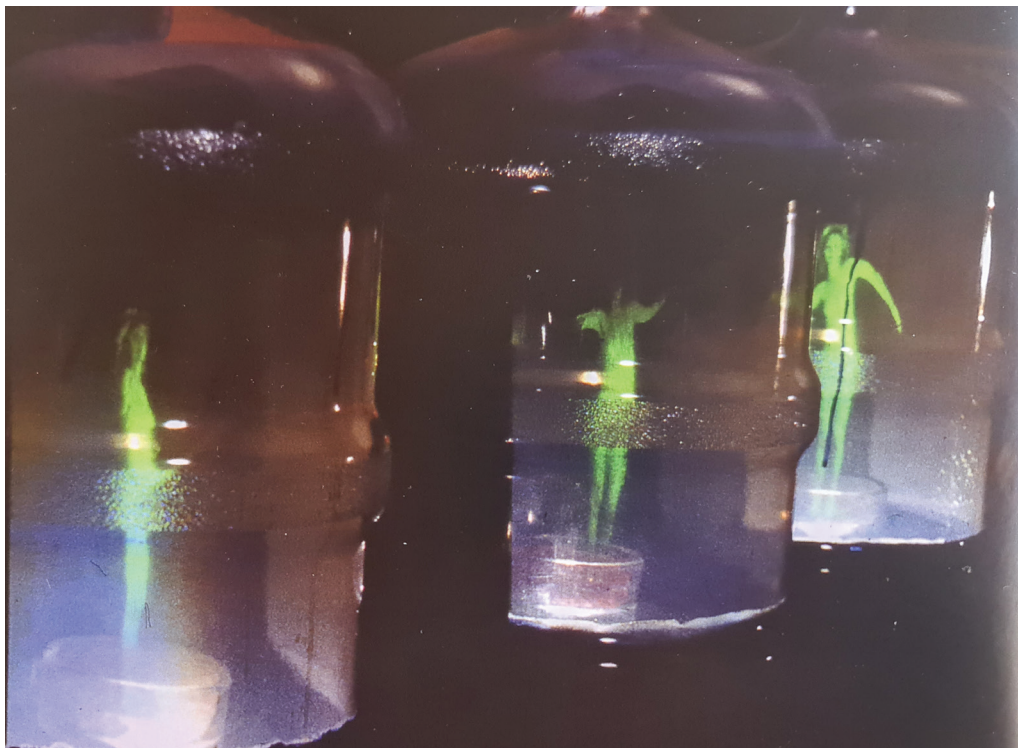


**'A Recreation of Adam'** uses a found hologram of three dancers. One of their leaps culminates in a finger pointing gesture. Paired to the down-pointing finger of God - here in green plastic and so placed that the fingers meet - reference is made to a famous painting by Michaelangelo - at a point of generation. The action occurs inside a mop, symbolic of gross materiality, while the dancers, fashioned of light, move though it like pure spirit.

**'Clonettes'** and **'Villa Mnemosyne'** - the latter uses a found hologram of a computer station - approach the question of the relation of technology to Art.



A Recreation of Adam (1978)



Clonettes





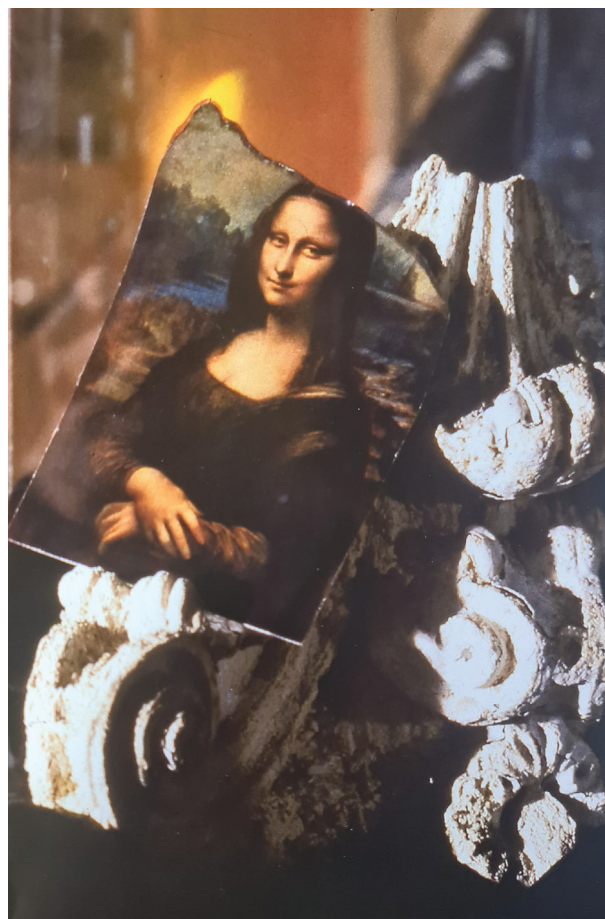
Circles (1978)



Villa Mnemosyne (1978)

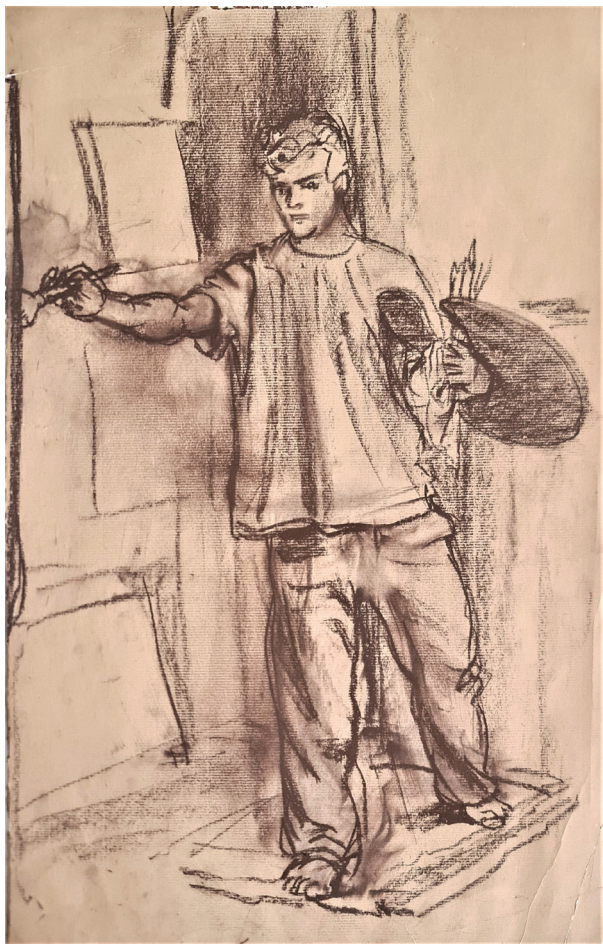


The Sign



Why Not Smile?







In the mid-1980s - mid-way through the hologram period - I offered to pose for Kurzen, noting the large and long-unused canvas in the studio at Zen Acre. This was prior to his building the new Studio. I wanted to learn from the experience but was also motivated by how Kurzen urged his students to pose for each other. As in the '40s, Kurzen made a series of ten drawings before beginning the painting, which he finished in three or four sessions.



Portrait of the Young Man as an Artist

55 x95, oil on canvas

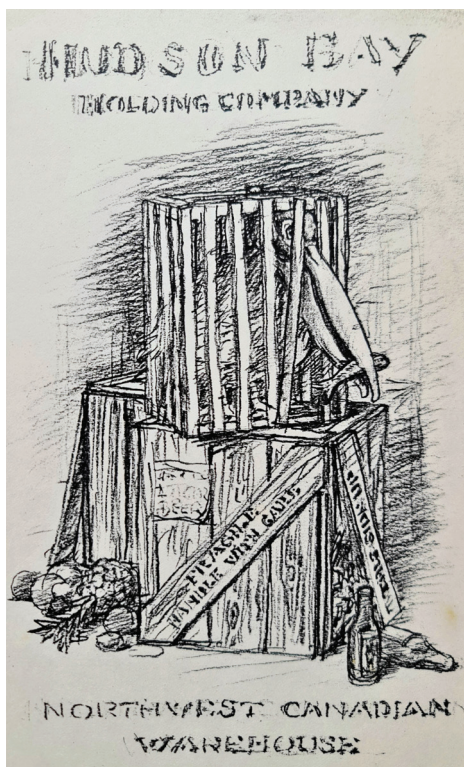


## Commercial Illustration and Space-a-Maze

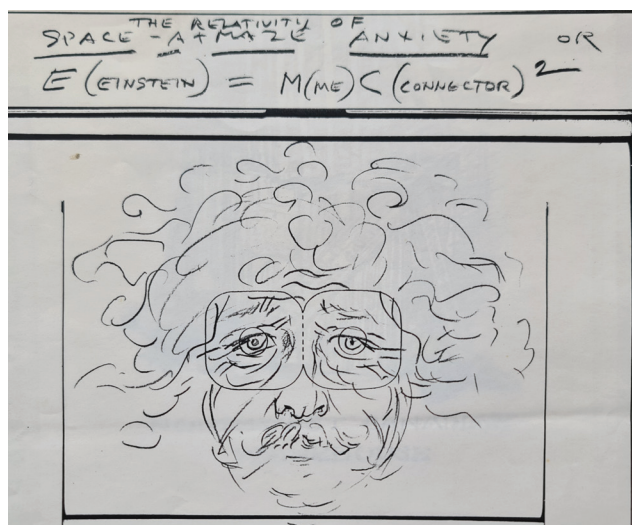
Commercial and publicity drawings are from the 1980s and '90s: these were used by the businesses in question.

For the 50th anniversary of Dalton (1976), Kurzen designed a new logo. The gesture of the out-turned hands expresses encouragement of freedom while providing protection and guidance.

Kurzen's adventure with the 'Space-a-maze' for which a patent was finally secured, and which was eventually manufactured and sold but did not ultimately succeed, was long and frustrating. Problem after problem had to be overcome. One of these involved the connectors. Kurzen finally solved this problem by using corrugated plastic. The 'Space-a-Maze' was a group of cardboard 'panel sets', each made with a two-way hinge and flaps such that a 'house' form could be made with one, or combining several, all sort of structures could be realized. The 'Space-a-Maze' remains a wonderful idea and deserves to be revived.







Another Andromeda  
53 x 46, 1964-65, oil on canvas



## The Greatest Lady

In the 1990s Kurzen made 2 bronze sculptures, '**In the Hand of the Muse**' and '**Rape of Europa**'. The hand of the Goddess, large and powerful, expresses how, as artists, we are carried. This is Kurzen's beloved 'mystery'. He described artistic work as 'prayer' which might eventually be answered, and if so in surprising ways. A work of Art cannot be calculated or forced: there is something involved which is divine, hidden and beyond our understanding to which we must remain vigilantly open.

Though the result is only a single bronze and an uncast plasticine figure (p 51), the Europa theme pre-occupied Kurzen for decades; he lavished uncounted hours on these pieces.

The portrait of Beatie Perry (opposite) was made at Southwood, her home on the Hudson. The view from the house, as well as one of Beatie's sculptures, figure in the painting. At Southwood, Kurzen also made '**The Duchess**', which commemorates a society lady of the early 20th century whose reputation persists in the area. The piece was a commission and remains in the Hudson valley.

'**Court Assure**', like the '**The Dutchess**', is made of sheet metal, or flat flexible material which, like cloth, can be cut, folded, fitted and attached. These processes were also used for the **Mythics**, the **Space-a-Maze**, many of the '**Valentines**' and the shoe pieces, which often involve bending and fitting, and other sculptures as well (such as '**Scarecrow**'), and even certain holograms. These are the methods of the tailor.

'**Court Assure**', again like '**The Dutchess**', treats the theme of the '**Great Lady**' (p 17 - this piece was always displayed at Zen Acre), of whom the greatest is the Muse.







Scarecrow



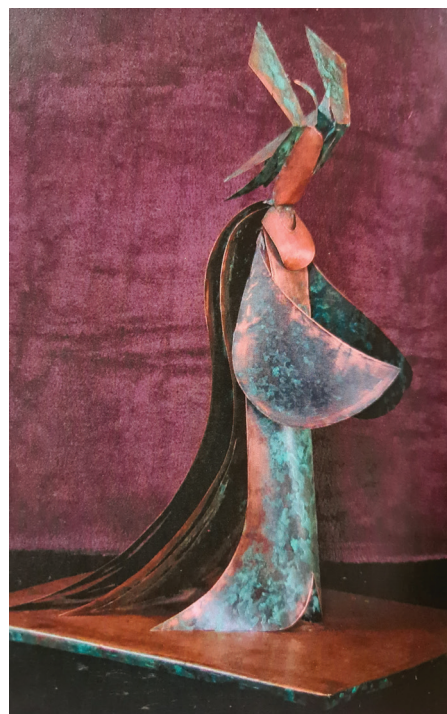
study for 'The Dutchess'  
13 x 19, charcoal, December 2005



'The Dutchess'  
sheet aluminum, about 4ft high (without stand)



Beatie Perry



Court Assure  
(Mandarin Princess)  
sheet copper



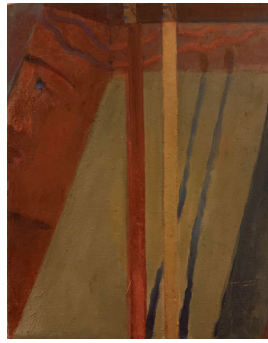
## The Late Paintings

With the closing of the Museum of Holography, and the winding down of his holographic work (which included the very time consuming composition of an article published in 'Leonardo'), Kurzen turned back to painting and to his Column figures, with their mythological and biblical themes, with a renewed spirit of adventurousness and freedom.

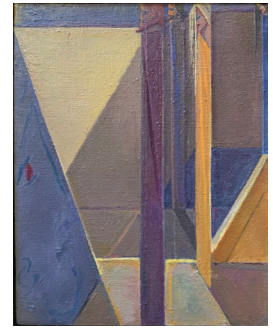
I have arranged these paintings in what I think is the order they were painted, or the order in which they were started, for Kurzen often worked for years on certain paintings, going back and fourth between them, sometimes leaving one untouched for years. It was in the 1990s that he reworked 'Circus Scene' (p 105), a painting begun in 1950, and I have mentioned many examples of Kurzen returning to older work or older manners.

'Antigone Guiding Oedipus with Ismene' I suspect of being started in the 1990s. It is the last of Kurzen's mythological paintings but certainly worked on well into the 2000s long after personal and artistic themes took over, because this painting has a stylistic relation to 'Floorsky' (p 265) in particular, a painting which was started in 2008 and reworked in 2011.

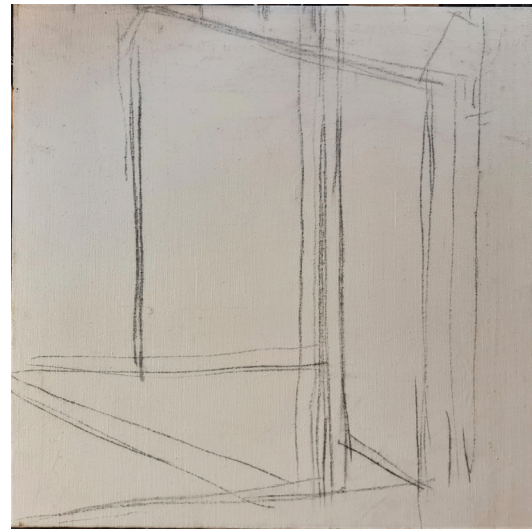
The first painting of what may be called the 'final' work is a statement of Kurzen's own place in the history of painting, standing at dusk between di Chirico and Poussin: '**Between Nicolo and Giorgio at Dusk**'. The only evidence for this title is the note (opposite; though research may reveal more). It is not even sure the title applies to this painting. The titles '**Field of Honor**' and '**Stairway to Square One**' I am also obliged to apply speculatively as there are no indications on the paintings themselves or other evidence (so far known) regarding them.



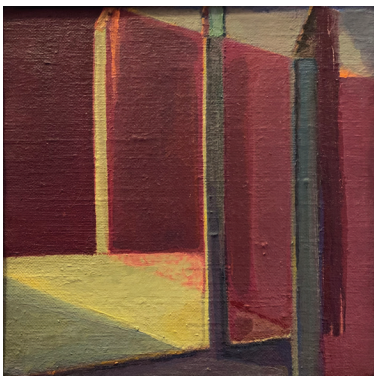
Unfinished, 8x10



Fateful Family, 8x10, 1991 - 93



(Fateful Family)  
24 x 24, charcoal on canvas



Oedipus and his Daughters, 8x8, 1990

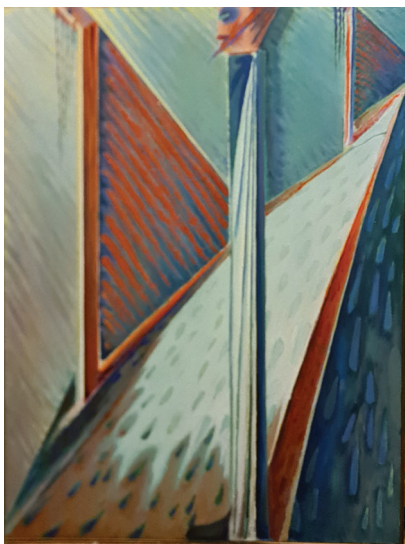


Lot and His Daughters, 26x36



Lot and his Daughters, 18x33½





Antigone Guiding Oedipus  
with Ismene  
40 x 54, oil on canvas



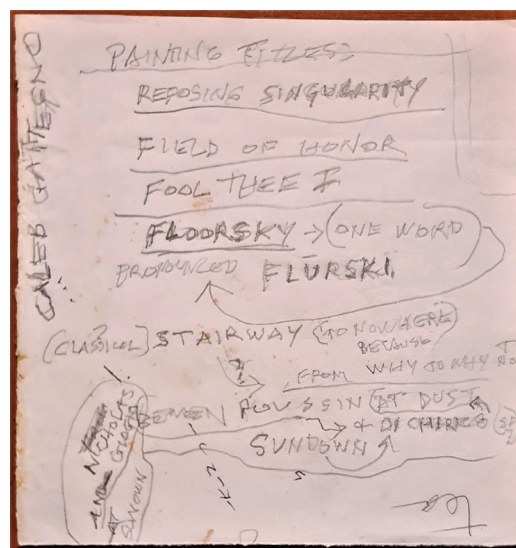
King and Queen  
51 x 60, oil on canvas



Between Nicolo and Giorgio at Dusk  
36 x 48, oil on canvas



Knight's Gambit  
36 x 60, oil on canvas



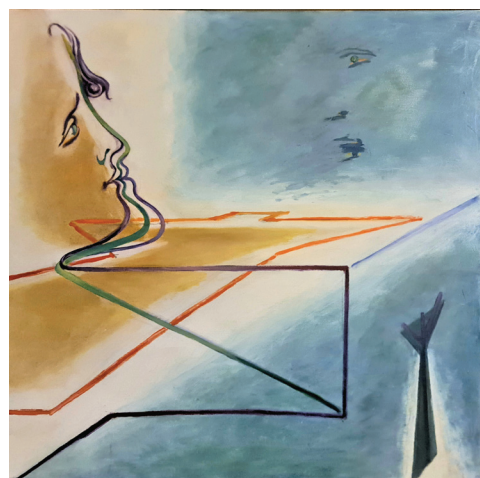


However, prior to **'Between Nicolo and Giorgio at Dusk'** a change of theme was already underway in two large paintings, **'King and Queen'** and **'Knight's Gambit'**. Chess, with Kurzen, always refers to Duchamp - his art, his influence on Kurzen and on art generally. **'Queen's Pawn Crowned'** (p 177) is the key.

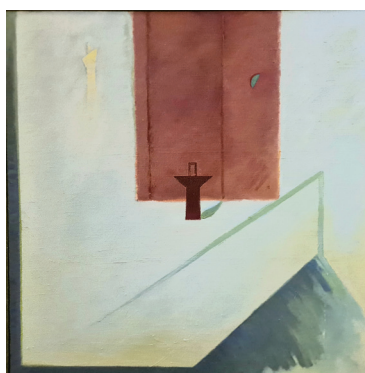
In **'King and Queen'**, blue has slain red who is prone and bleeding. A political hope? Are the king and queen *in* the game? I will venture that King and Queen are Aaron and Saja, the chess theme a reference to their meeting and relationship, so bound up with Duchamp and Art, a theme recurrent in Kurzen's art. This painting seems to have been started in the last years of Saja life.

In **'Knight's Gambit'**, as in **'The Dioscuri'** (p 62), the figure is double. Here it represents two aspects of a single person: the hero, the artist, confronting the great game of life and art. At first I thought the inscribed horse might indicate that this painting is **'Field of Honor'**, or that the painting (p 267) to which I have now attributed this title might be **'Between Nicolo and Giorgio at Dusk'**. For several reasons I think not: 1) the long shadows and warm sunset light, 2) the very possible representation of di Chirico in the form of a horse and that Poussin represented himself with long hair, while 3) the painting I believe is **'Field of Honor'** presents a direct confrontation and includes 4) the tic-tac-toe 'battle board' on the wall.

In **'Between Nicolo and Giorgio at Dusk'** the figure, a chess pawn, would seem not to be Duchamp but Kurzen, plaything of the Muse, between the old (Nicolo Poussin) and the new (Giorgio di Chirico), wanting both, at the end of his own life but also in the twilight of 'Art' as his whole youth and training had taught him to know and teach it. That Kurzen chose to sum up 'the old' and 'the new' in these artists, when there are so many possibilities, is intriguing. Thanks to my very extensive conversations



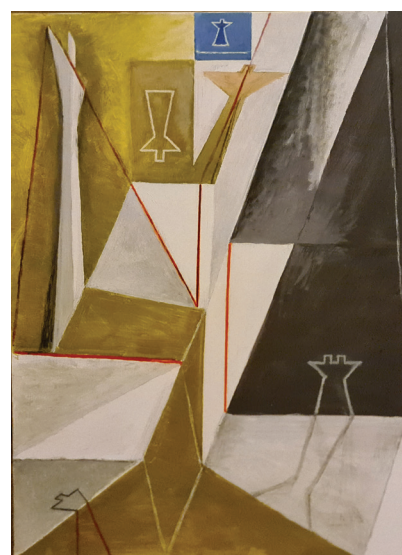
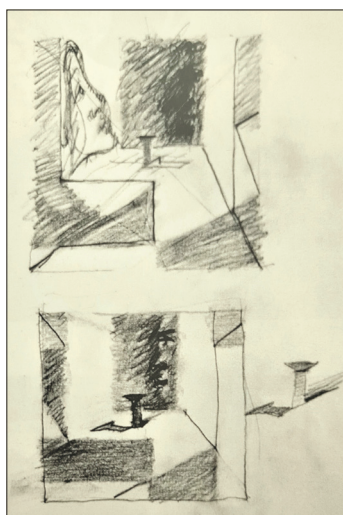
Command Performance  
24 x 24, 2002-3  
oil on canvas



Solitaire  
R1, 24 x 24, 1994-5  
oil on canvas



End Game  
32 x 33, 1995-99  
oil on canvas

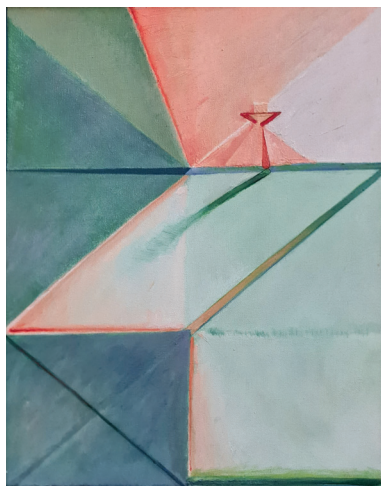


The "Waiting" Room  
34 x 46, oil on canvas





Abandonato  
R1, 36 x 36, 2003-4



Isolato  
26 x 33½, 2005 - 6



Apotheosis  
46 x 46, 2006

about art and artists with Kurzen over the years I have much to say about this. Here I will only mention one thing these three artists, Poussin, di Chirico and Kurzen, have in common, which is a major reason for this choice: all experienced isolation or exclusion in one way or another. Poussin was celebrated in his own time, but his success was in France and he preferred to remain in Rome where he could work in a tranquil and personal way, untroubled by the giddy and faddish atmosphere of his own country. Meanwhile, not only caravagism but certain excesses of the baroque were troubling to the classically minded Poussin. He was dedicated to the Roman School which he regarded - as many have done since his time - as the royal road of painting, and it seems he felt a certain despondence about the future of Painting.

The art world turned against di Chirico, after his initial success and celebrity, when he took what appeared like a 'reactionary' direction. Though the young Kurzen was influenced by this, his piece '**Giorgio's Return**' (p 227) can be read as a return of his esteem for di Chirico, though that shift certainly occurred prior to the New York retrospective the piece ostensibly commemorates. Here all are pawns in a moral but mysterious game of tic-tac-toe. Kurzen's '**Golgotha**' idea (p 102), which exists in dozen's of versions from over the years, sat in as an unfinished canvas in his studio - a 'christian joke' a dark reminder and message of hope - until the end. This is '**The Waiting Room**'; waiting for recognition, for a word from the Muse, for death. Duchamp said: "I am a waiter": attendance? service? This painting is certainly a lesson in all the things he taught - for those who can attend to it.



Floorsky  
34 x 46, 2007 - 8/2011  
(pronounced "Flurski")

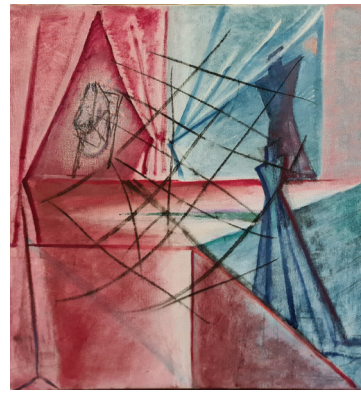


In the same way, after justified youthful expectations of worldly artistic success which must have seemed to him to have evaporated strangely during the 1950s, and with the advent of pop and neo-dada, Kurzen saw himself in a new and less promising world. Whatever his reaction may have been at the time, the mature Kurzen was philosophical. He saw worldliness for what it was and, though he may have been shocked and disappointed by developments in the 1960s, he was never embittered or regretful later. Yet Kurzen had a worldly side; he loved socializing and valued his connections to 'important' people. He was no snob but he did have a sense of who he was as an artist and the significance of his work. That this sense was shared by hardly anyone else, or that it might go eternally unrecognized, did not fundamentally trouble him. He was too conscious of the precariousness of life, the shallowness of reputation, of how vanity was the essence of the world. Thackeray was one of his and Saja's favorite authors.

The actor in the paintings which follow, with one exception, is the pawn, the artist, Kurzen himself. He is '**Isolato**', '**Solitaire**' even '**Abandonato**', or dreams of an '**Apotheosis**' of the soul or of his art. This is the '**End Game**', a version of '**Knight's Gambit**' but where there is no standing aside, no grand remove from the field of battle.

As Kurzen grew feeble with extreme old age, he searched, as he

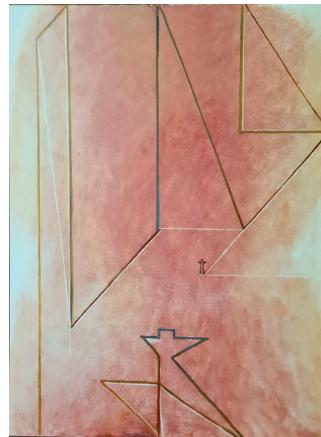
told me, for ways to "paint with less paint", to make the larger paintings he wanted to make with his remaining strength. The ultimate results are '**Monocular Image**' and what is surely his last work: '**Stairway to Square One**', the soul's journey from the invisible into the visible world, up and back into the invisible world, into the waiting presence of a god-like figure which, like all the pawn figures, is based on a cross. Note how the living figure, half way up the stairs, is reminiscent of the '**Artist Painting a Mountain**' (p 10).



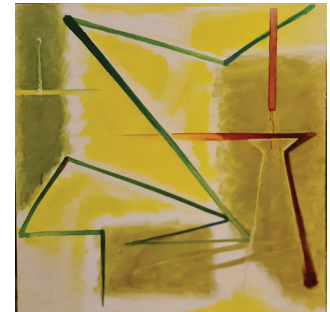
("Drama")  
28 x 30



'Golgotha' or  
'The Unlikely Win  
of the Three Crosses'  
18 x 24, charcoal on canvas



Reposing Singularity  
34 x 36, oil on canvas



Strong Medicine  
34 x 34, oil on canvas



Good for Reproduction  
34 x 36, oil on canvas



Field of Honor  
34 x 34

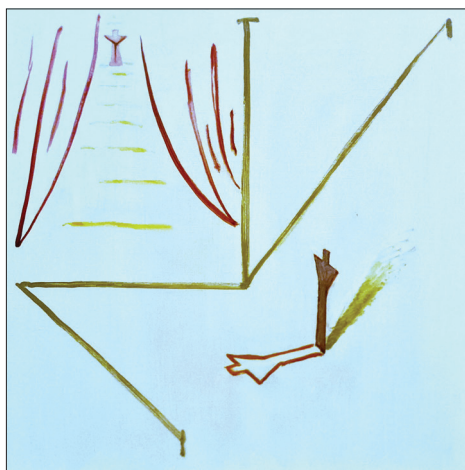




Fool Thee I  
46 x 46, oil on canvas



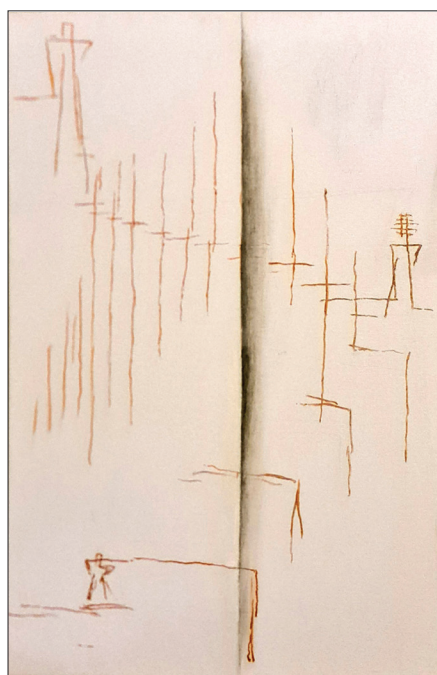
Virtual Consciousness  
46 x 46, oil on canvas



Monocular Image  
34 x 34, oil on canvas

The remaining paintings are mostly about painting itself, with the exception of the one designated, for convenience, 'Drama', apparently a scene in a theater. The charcoal lines suggest the painting is rejected but this is not absolutely clear. '**Strong Medicine**' which not impossibly refers to Kurzen's medical complaints, is more likely about the strong color. '**Good for Reproduction**' might be a sour comment on the unfortunate effect of reproduction on painting and art generally. '**Reposing Linearity**', distinguished by the absence of an figure, aside from the 'repose' of the lines on the various plains, might refer to the absence of human drama as a relief. '**Reposing Singularity**', likewise, probably refers to a modernist concern: the surface, here the 'singularity'.

'**Floorsky**'. '**Monocular Image**', '**Virtual Consciousness**' and '**Fool Thee I**' deal with another modernist concern, or bugaboo: illusion. A watershed in the progress of the *Avant-Guard* was deligitimization of representation and illusion, a triumph of the late 1950s. But eliminating illusion in painting is impossible because any mark implies space. '**Monocular Image**' - all paintings are monocular images - makes this clear. Even without overlaps, even while employing strategies meant to 'affirm the surface', illusion persists. Illusion can no more be avoided than the fascination for human drama can be suppressed. In painting floor and sky, above and below, will trade places with a line. Paint-



Stairway to Square One  
36 x 54, oil on canvas

ing is, and has always been, a realm of virtual consciousness of the very type that binocular computer generated virtual reality claims to be. The painter always fools your eye. The 'I' in '**Fool Thee I**' is the painter, and here, as in Kurzen's mirror paintings, the pawn figure is the observer, us, the second person, 'thee' - the intimate form of 'you'. This, when it comes to painting, is personal service.



## Pedagogy

Rather than teaching routines or getting embroiled in questions of materials, Kurzen helped his students - both vocational and non-vocational - to get directly into the experience of actual art making. He insisted, however, that art, being a language, required learning and the development of “discipline”, by which he meant things like eye-training and understanding aspects of composition and color use. He invented exercises to open the students’ way into different aspects of drawing and painting. Some of these exercises required demonstrations, many of which survive. These “demos”, like his students’ work, were done on newsprint with charcoal and poster paint. They are now fragile and sometimes in need of restoration.

The exercises include ‘Portrait of a Hat’, ‘Painter in Studio’, ‘Fortune Teller’, ‘Rooster’, ‘Three Shapes and Three lines’, ‘Imaginary Portrait’, and for his life class the ‘Rectangle’ and ‘Straight Lines and Arcs’ drawings. Over 100 Life class demos survive, as do almost as many ‘Black and White exercises’ and ‘Imaginary Portraits’. Dozens of ‘Rooster’ drawings and about 20 ‘Silhouettes’ also exist. Only part of all this is shown on the following pages.

There are no traces of the ‘Portrait of a Hat’ or ‘Three shapes’ exercise, which did not involve a demo but only following a set of simple rules. In the latter the student had to fill a page with three shapes: the first bigger than half the page, the second less than half the size of the first, and so on. This helped sensitize the student to quantity in composition. ‘The Fortune Teller’ and ‘Painter in Studio’ were an introduction to composition based on a drawing constructed from a grid, or two triangles. The drawing easily established, allowed the student to interpret the subject freely.

The ‘Rooster’ was a beginning painting exercise in which the student easily created a dynamic composition by using a form which can be strongly realized in a very free manner. It taught the proper relation of drawing and composition. The ‘Silhouette’ exercise developed awareness of the relation of space to surface.

In the ‘Imaginary Portrait’ demo Kurzen requested colors from students. He covered the lower third of

the paper (18 x 24) with the first color and the upper part with the second. The students designated an age, sex and other characteristics of the subject and Kurzen then extended the lower color into the upper to form a head. Two other colors were given for hair and clothes. The painting could then be further developed freely. It taught the proper relation of color to representation.

The most famous exercise was the ‘Black and White’. This required a complex demonstration of several steps: a vertical sheet (usually 24 x 36) is divided by a vertical line into uneven parts. One is painted black; into this part, using collage, the light area is introduced. Then with black paint the dark area is brought into the light area. These 2 steps are then repeated. Lines of different length are added, followed by some wash across the page. The exercise evolved over the years and sometimes included color. An exciting foray into pure abstraction, it sensitized the student to how a fundamental aspect of painting is shapes as such. Kurzen relished making these paintings and regarded them as his own finished work.

Each of Kurzen’s exercises is a system to help students effortlessly overcome specific obstacles, freeing them to spontaneously experience other aspects. The apparently arbitrary quality of the exercises simultaneously gives a direct experience of fundamental aspects of painting, an understanding of which the student thereby might absorb more or less unconsciously - because they might also be discussed before, during or after the exercise. The teaching embodied in these exercises derived partly from Kurzen’s study and development in the 1940s, and owed much to the mentoring he received from Vytlačil. They are therefore revelatory of the deepest aspects of modernism.







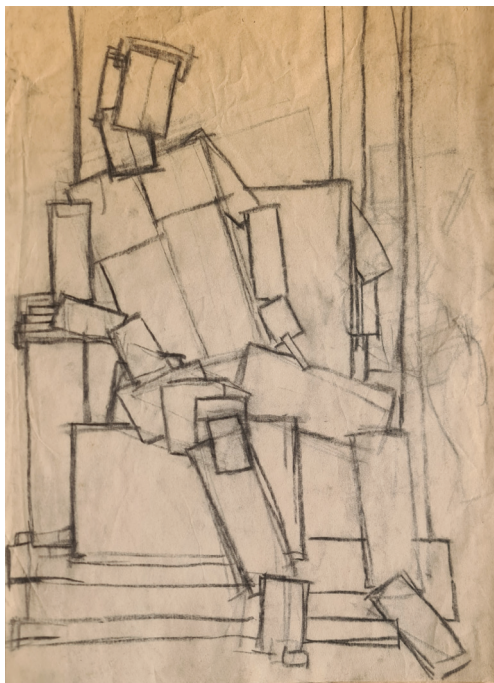
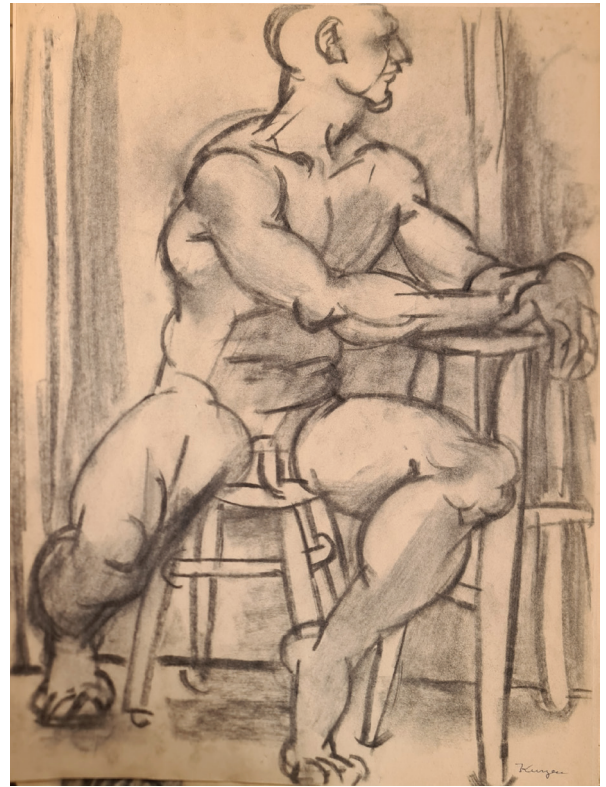
Life drawing from Kurzen's class  
1974 by Paul Rhoads



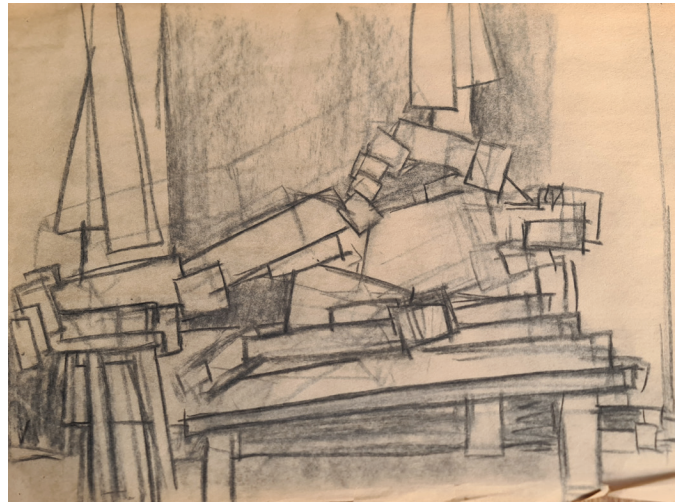
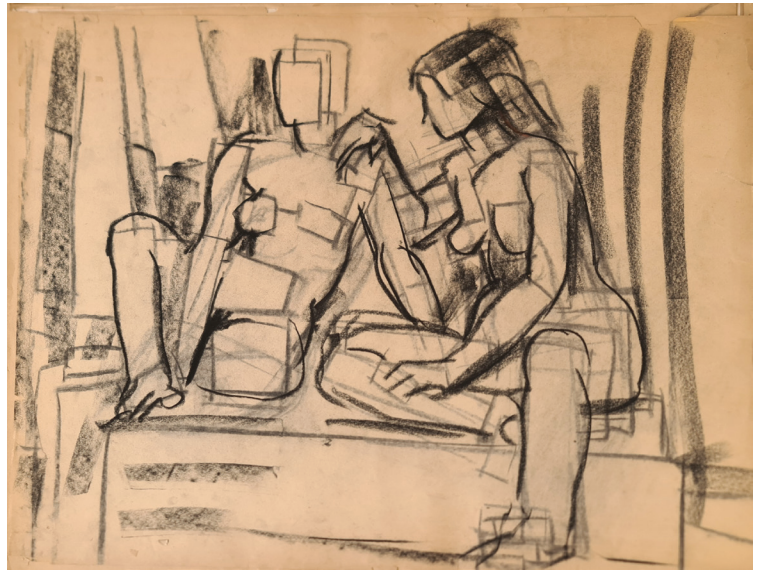


## ‘Rectangle’ and Straight Lines and Arcs’ Demos

Beginning life students, after a preliminary period working on even more basic things, were introduced first to the ‘Rectangle’ exercise where everything is interpreted with over-lapping rectangles. Without the distraction of contour and through the exigency of the overlap, the student concentrates on relationships of near and far, including this relation within forms. This exercise prepared the student for ‘Straight Lines and Arcs’ which required that everything be expressed in terms of overlapping and alternating lines and arcs, teaching the relation of contour to volume. This exercise gradually gave way to free drawing which then proceeded on a solid foundation.











7 of the 19 Racks which, as of this writing, make transportable and recoverable the Kurzen oeuvre.